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OUTRAGE

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THE OUTRAGE

BY

“BANCO”

AUTHOR OF

“THE BOY WHO DIDN'T”

“THE ONLY WOMAN”

•

LONDON

T. WERNER LAURIE LTD.

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THE OUTRAGE

LEADING UP TO THE STORY

It was one night in the month of July, 1914, that Morice Mandrake realised definitely his desire to marry.

If only he had come to this state of realisation one year earlier much sordid suffering might have been averted, but as he waited until less than six weeks before unforgettable crimes and outrages were perpetrated in Belgium by Germany, Demon Destiny suddenly found certain elements of effective drama placed within his reach.

And Demon Destiny—who had always been short of dramatic effects when settling the career of Morice Mandrake—got to work.

* * * * *

"So you have made up your mind—you mean to sacrifice freedom for comfort? You intend to marry?" said Colonel Leeming puffing contentedly at his half-crown cigar, and surveying the dancing members of the Elysia Supper Club as they one-stepped past on the narrow stretch of polished floor surrounded by

small round tables, laden with food, flowers, and wine.

"I don't say that I *intend* to—I only say that I *want* to," replied Morice Mandrake, staring steadily at things and people on his left for the main reason that inclination prompted him to stare steadily at one person on his right.

"The same thing. I've known you since you were fifteen, and during the twenty years which have elapsed since then (is it twenty or twenty-one?) I've never known you want to do a thing without doing it."

"Yes—perhaps—but——"

"And why any hesitation? What obstacles? What drawbacks?"

"Uncertainty, and my own inborn priggish prudery. My grandmother was a Quaker, you know, and I suppose I can't get rid of the hereditary strain—also my grandfather was a lawyer. Legal caution and Quaker prudery don't fit in with modern conditions, I know, yet I can't quite get outside them. I want to be absolutely *sure* of the woman I marry——"

"Her morals, you mean?"

"Yes—er—her past. And pasts matter less and less as things hurry on. There seems no time in modern life to worry about a past. But I *must* worry about it—my wife must be——"

"As straight as the Quaker grandmother, I suppose?"

"Absolutely. And that is my trouble—it's so difficult to be dead sure, especially in an artistic

crowd which, even though it may be too clean and well-bred to be classed as Bohemia, is without the moral strictness of the best upper and the cramped middle-classes. Art in any form has such a damned lot to answer for ! ”

And as he finished speaking, Morice Mandrake's impassive blue eyes veered slowly from the left to the right, and rested momentarily on a young woman who was seated at a table with three other people—an uninteresting, prosperous-looking middle-aged couple, and an equally uninteresting and prosperous-looking middle-aged man.

The two men were talking stodgily to each other, evidently forgetting the existence of their feminine companions, and the young woman appeared to be making eager efforts at drawing comments and conclusions from the middle-aged woman, who, so far as observation could suggest, belonged to the class which never forms opinions, never notices, never absorbs, never expresses, and never disagrees.

The young woman (her age might be anything from twenty-one to twenty-nine) was all eagerness, as though she were fully determined that everything in life should be made worth while.

Colonel Leeming watched Morice Mandrake watching the young woman, then he said :

“ She is unusually pretty ! ”

“ Who ? ”

“ Miss Everest—Florence Everest, isn't it ?—and she doesn't look in the least like a lady novelist ! ”

Morice laughed very good-humouredly, as though he were glad at being found out.

"No, she doesn't, does she? I find her perfect—from my point of view she is quite perfection," he answered more seriously.

"And yet you can't feel sure."

Morice stared vaguely ahead for some seconds, then he hitched his chair closer up to the table, and suddenly spoke with repressed, yet almost ferocious emphasis, while his face grew heavy and nearly brutal. Looking at him just then one could understand that it might be possible to pity the woman who belonged to him.

"Does a man ever truly feel sure? Can he? Is it possible?" he said. "I know all about decent bringing-up, and sheltered lives, and all that sort of thing, but that's passing away. In these times a woman of twenty-three or twenty-five—particularly a professional woman—lives a century before she marries, and very few women live through a century of experiences without one of these experiences being—*love!* And love that has been of anything but the lightest and most penny-weekly variety I will not tolerate in my wife. The creed of a woman being entitled to her past, just as a man is entitled to his, fills me with fury and disgust. One real decent emotion purges a man, even though he hasn't got a foul experience left to sample—but nothing purges a woman. There must be nothing behind a woman—at least not behind *my* woman—and it's so difficult to know—so damnably difficult to know!"

Colonel Leeming nodded again, and once more glanced at the girl sitting at the table with the three frumps.

"I can't think there's much difficulty in knowing—er—*there*," he said. "I'd stake a great deal more than I wish to lose on the woman you want being within your reach. You can see by her face that it's all present and future with her. A past always leaves something behind it, and there's nothing there. Look!"

And Morice did look. He was glad to look—he was always passionately glad to look at Florence Everest, for the reason that everything she did and seemed satisfied every sense and desire of his eyes and of his heart.

She was still talking eagerly and volubly to Mrs. Hillyer—the entirely uninteresting and uninterested cousin in whose house she lived—and as she leant forward and gazed into her companion's stolid face it was easy to see that never by any chance could she commit the conversational *bêtise* of allowing her attention to wander for a second.

Her mind was trained to concentration.

And beside the desirable qualities of her mind, there were those of her face and figure.

• Her face was charming, both in its earnestness and gaiety, its youth, and its moments of premature maturity. Her hair was pale gold—the gold of silver sand—and her grey eyes were surmounted by brows and lashes that were legitimately dark.

Her figure was very girlish, but not in the least undeveloped. There was something gloriously womanly in the swell of her bosom, unhampered by any corsets that were more than boned waist belts.

Her fingers were pink-tipped and beautiful.

For some moments the two men remained watching her in silent contemplation, then as though succumbing to the force of magnetic influence she turned her head and saw them.

Then she bowed and smiled—and smiled again. And it was during that second smile, when her eyes lingered in meeting the eyes of Morice Mandrake, that the truth was made manifest.

“If you want to know you had better ask her—you’ll be a fool if you don’t find some satisfactory way of making sure,” said Colonel Leeming, when the smile was finished, and Florence Everest was once again talking to her cousin.

“Ask her? My God! yes!—what an astonishingly sound suggestion. I should know if she told the truth—nothing could prevent my knowing. Ask her!—of course, yes—*I’ll ask her!*”

And as he finished his string of exclamations Morice heaved a deep sigh of relief.

This was just the sort of idea he had been waiting to get hold of.

Andrew Leeming had more than justified his existence by giving it to him.

Naturally it would be a delicate business, but, all the same, he would—*ask her!*

* * * * *

“I really think, Florence, it would be nice to get home—I can’t see there is anything to be gained by staying here any longer,” said Mrs. Hillyer, when Florence had just finished relating dramatic details concerning the alleged career of a semi-bogus princess

who, wearing a sheath-like skirt of green satin and spangles, looked like a one-stepping fish.

"Oh! Lena, there's always something to be gained by being *anywhere* where there are people—people are so wonderful!" replied Florence enthusiastically.

"Ah! yes, that's because you like to put them in your books and——"

"No, no, it isn't that—it's because people are the only things which never do what one expects them to do. Clocks, machines, plants, fountains, always do what you know they will do, but people are perpetually surprising. Oh! you *don't* want to go yet, do you?"

This last inquiry was made quite piteously as Mrs. Hillyer began jerking her ample arms into the wide sleeves of an ample satin cloak hanging over the back of her chair.

"Yes, I really do want to go, and I am sure that Arthur and Mr. Lyle have had enough of it—haven't you, Mr. Lyle?—haven't you, Arthur?"

Mr. Lyle and Arthur confessed that they had.

"Then we had better be going at once because ——"

But before Mrs. Hillyer could give any definite reason for insisting upon an immediate departure, she found her hand being shaken by another hand—the hand of Morice Mandrake.

"Ah! good-evening, Mr. Mandrake—we are just going," she announced placidly.

"Going! But why? The night is so very young—quite a juvenile, so far!" And here he turned to look at Florence, feeling suddenly as he looked as

though she belonged to him. "Do *you* want to go?" he added almost breathlessly.

"No, I don't—I never want to go away from anywhere where there is anything to be seen," she answered.

"Then don't go—will you stay and let me look after you and see you home? You couldn't have a more conscientious chaperon—*will* you?"

The last "will you" sounded almost like a veiled command.

And ten minutes later the three stout normal people had taken their departure, leaving together a young man and a young woman whose desire for each other had suddenly become engulfing and submerging.

They had been in love for months, and even, perhaps, had fully recognised the fact, but to-night a climax was reached without any special reason on either side.

Their hands were tingling to clasp and be clasped; their lips were quivering to kiss and be kissed.

Yet for the present they could only talk as people do talk when they have no recognised right to clasp hands and to kiss.

"Are you going away soon?" asked Florence carelessly. (That was a question that must be put carelessly.)

"Yes, next week. I'm going to Ireland and to Scotland to visit all those aunts and uncles who won't leave me money if I don't look them up. Probably they won't even if I *do*, but it's always better not to neglect these matters. When do you go?"

"I go next week too—on Tuesday or Wednesday—to Belgium."

"Why Belgium?"

"Oh! because I want to lay part of my next book in a Belgian village where there are picturesque farms and farmers' wives and daughters. I hope to stop a couple of months, and then, perhaps, go on to Holland and Germany."

"Ah! yes—ah! yes!" he answered abstractedly, and made no sort of intelligent comment such as the occasion demanded, for the simple reason that he was thinking how Andrew Leeming's advice must be taken with as little delay as possible.

Belgium—Holland—Germany! Good heavens! anything might happen in any of those countries—in any of them she might meet a man who would desire her as intensely as he desired her!

"What are you thinking about? You were frowning so very ominously," cried Florence, suddenly looking away from the panorama of people to look where she wanted to look—at her companion's face.

"I was thinking about you," replied Morice, not allowing himself a second for hesitation.

"About me! How nice! At least I hope it's nice. I *hope* you are thinking nice things!" This light touch of coquetry was almost necessary and it didn't seem undignified and absurd as coquetry usually does. But Morice did not respond to the strain of lightness and gaiety. He wanted to get through with something, now, at once.

"Do you care for this sort of thing?" he asked

suddenly, indicating by a jerk of his head the whole atmosphere and environment of the supper club.

"I care for anything which feeds my mind, because it is so difficult for an ordinary woman who has led an ordinary woman's life to get her mind fed. And with my work it must be a case of mental stoking all the while."

"You only write about things you have experienced?"

"I can't say that, of course. I haven't been married and divorced and buried and——"

"But have you been in love? *Have you ever had a tremendous love affair?*"

He waited breathlessly for her answer, casting the full searchlight of his brain across her face so that not a flicker or expression should escape him.

Because when she answered he would know if it was the truth—yes, he would know!

"NEVER!"

The answer was given quietly but forcibly, and as he heard it and saw the steadiness of her eyes Morice Mandrake felt at rest with the souls of his Quaker grandmother and legal grandfather.

He knew that whatever he wished to say to Florence Everest might be said.

Yet it was worth while making doubly sure—his inherited caution suggested that.

"How do you write about love, then, if you haven't experienced it?" he demanded after a pause.

"I don't write about it much for that very reason. If you had been friendly enough to read any of my books you would have noticed that."

"Has no man ever made love to you?"

"Yes—two. One was married and took drugs, and he nearly kissed me at a stupid Leap-Year dance when the lights went out; and the other was a French duke whom I met in Switzerland and was engaged to for three days."

"Did he—the French duke—did he kiss you?"

"Yes, nine times—three times every day that we were engaged—morning, afternoon and evening. But by the time we reached the ninth kiss we both felt bored, so I suggested it shouldn't go on. I was sorry not to be a *duchesse*, but I couldn't stand feeling bored."

"And you take your oath—your oath, mind you, Florence—that there has been no other passionate episode of any description in your life?"

"*I take my oath!*"

And he knew then, finally, that it was true.

This was the woman he wanted.

"You naturally wish to know why I ask these questions and insist on your taking oaths while enjoying the delirious gaieties of a London supper club?"

This time he spoke gladly, chaffingly, tenderly—he could do so now that he had been made sure that everything was right.

"Yes, it—it would be as well for me to be told, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose it would. Of course you know already, to an extent, but you had better quite understand. I asked what I have asked because I am tremendously in love with you and wish more than I wish anything else that you will be my wife. But tremendously as I love you I would not have begged you to marry me

(as I am going to do) if I hadn't been quite sure—er—er——”

“Quite sure that I was what the world calls ‘straight’—that’s what you mean, isn’t it?”

Morice seized her hand beneath the table cloth. It was splendid, the way she had helped him out and instantly understood.

“Yes, that is what I mean,” he answered.

Then their hands parted again as a waiter collected empty glasses in passing.

“I think a man is quite justified in asking questions such as you have asked,” said Florence as the banjo and mandolin band broke into a waltz that cried out for strings swept by bows instead of jerked by plectrums.

“You do? You are not one of those women who shout out about the same standard of morality for both sexes?”

“No, I am not. From what life has taught me I realise that such a thing would be almost impossible. For one thing a man is tempted every hour of every day of his life, and a woman only sometimes. Also, what is temptation to the average man isn’t temptation to the average woman. I have always said—in fact I have written it—that up to the time a man and woman are married his past is exclusively his own and hers exclusively his. Other women hate me for my theories and the suffragettes would lock me up—but that is what I think!”

“You are splendid!” answered Morice. “Yes—you are splendid!”

They both waited, then he leant across the table

and asked her, not to dance a Boston or to consume a cocktail, but to share his life.

"Will you marry me, Florence?" he said.

"Yes, I will," she replied.

"You love me?"

"I fancy that I love you intensely—I have thought I did for some weeks now."

"You can't be quite sure?"

"Yes, I can—I am——"

Then he understood her hesitation and laughed gladly, because he understood it.

She, as befitted a woman whose thoughts were worth being printed and bound and sold, never shirked any view of any question—not even a personal one when the time for personalities came round.

It was the physical side of the matter that was filling her with vague uncertainty, for an introspective mind made her understand that no man or woman can make completely sure of his or her feelings towards a lover until there has been an embrace.

Only the touch of lips and hands and the passionate press of arms can give full conviction, no matter what the ladylike shirkers of all big questions may say to the contrary.

But Morice would show her that there was no need for fear or doubt. Once let them be alone together and she should be made sure of her own heart and her own awakened emotions.

"I am going to take you home now," he said standing up suddenly and smiling down at her.

Florence looked up at him, gave a last glance at the merry scene—one of London's many merry scenes

which belonged to times of peace—and then rose obediently.

She wasn't at all sure that she wanted to go home for another hour or more—yet here she was meekly consenting to go!

But she herself understood the reason of her own weakness. She knew that she was tremendously in love.

And without speaking a word they passed down the long supper room, up a flight of stairs carpeted in *vieux rose*, through the entrance lounge and into a waiting taxi.

Then after giving instructions to the driver Morice stepped into the cab and took his place by Florence's side.

The moments which followed—while the taxi was cutting across a main thoroughfare to reach silent by-streets—were poignant ones and full of supreme anticipation.

Then Morice spoke.

"You said a minute ago you couldn't be sure if you loved me, so now I'm going to make you sure," he said.

Florence gave no answer—she only slipped into his arms and involuntarily lifted her face to meet his kisses.

"Do you know now, sweetheart—darling?" asked Morice when two streets, one square and a terrace had been left behind.

"Yes, I know now," answered Florence gladly.

"I can be quite sure now!"

And in this way all the doubts surrounding the

desires, hopes and intentions of two ardent human beings were removed.

They were satisfied with each other and everything connected with each other. Mentally, morally and physically each was all the other desired. Two hours previously they would have been able to live apart without anything beyond vain and unclassified regrets—now the bare idea of contemplating life without each other constituted insupportable anguish.

It was one of those cases when a fully grown man and woman found themselves capable of loving with all the spontaneity and fervour of "flapper" and "fresher" yet with the strength of their maturity supplying an indestructible background for their passions.

* * * * *

When No. 10, Row Square, Kensington, was reached Morice helped Florence turn the Yale key in its insignificant lock, then followed her into the large dimly-lit hall.

"It is July now—when shall we be married?" he asked.

"Some time next year," answered Florence vaguely.

He laughed softly and drew her to him.

Some time next year! Fancy, waiting till "some time next year" for the woman who was pure and sweet and perfect, and wholly his own!

"When do you return from Belgium?" was his next question.

"Well, the end of September if—if I don't go on to Holland and Germany——"

"Yes, well, you won't go on to Holland and

Germany—not just then—because we shall be married in October. I will go to Scotland and Ireland and think about you all the time I am there; you will go to Belgium (if you must) and think about me all the time you are there. When we both return we will be married. You can write the new novel while we are away on the honeymoon—it will help to fill up time!”

At first she laughed, then the laughter died out of her eyes while new depths took its place.

Of her own accord she raised her two hands and placed them on his shoulders.

“I am so glad, my dear, that we have found out all about how—how we both feel!” she cried, evidently not quite being able to find the words to express exactly what she meant. “I know that I can trust you never to distrust me—I know that you feel sure I am, and will be, all you want me to be—and I know, oh! Morice, I *know* you are going to make me so happy! I have thought of other people’s happiness, watched other people’s happiness and written of other people’s happiness, and now I am going to have some all of my own! Ah! . . . Good-night, dear!”

She broke off abruptly and he understood why. This was the first time in all her life that she had “let herself go”—and the first time a woman always pulls up quickly.

“Good-night, my love—my heart—my perfect girl who will be a perfect wife!” answered the man of thirty-five who had always been proud of the restraint he was able to put upon his own feelings and protestations at every crisis of his life!

But for once he wouldn't restrain words or anything else.

He was in love.

God ! it was good to be in love with, and to own, the right woman !

THE STORY

EVERYWHERE there was fear.

The very dogs drawing the little wooden carts dropped their tails as though they were afraid, and the cows in the fields lowed piteously.

It seemed as if they knew that slaughter and carnage were in the air.

It had all come so suddenly — Belgium's men had become martyred heroes almost before they realised that they were called upon to save a continent.

And now the enemy was doing hideous things—hideous, horrible things, the news of which spread from town to town and village to village.

Devastated fields, houses reduced to piles of broken brick and mortar, level ground furrowed with trenches !

Things were like that now, but it had begun gradually, at least it had seemed gradual to some of the people who did not understand that Belgium was out to defend herself, and others.

It seemed now as though every man was wearing a uniform and carrying arms, while the civil guards were glad and proud of at last being able to serve their country.

Motor-cars and motor-cycles were everywhere. They appeared to have sprung up by magic, and the trembling civilian population wondered vaguely why they were there and what they meant.

All the wonderings were vague at first.

And the bellowing of the cattle being driven in from the villages which were most likely to be the first victims of German invasion, was piteous—so was the bleating of tired footsore sheep and the squeaking of frightened pigs.

They didn't understand that they, too, were being called upon to lay down their lives in resistance of a siege.

* * * * *

At first "*les Alboches*" had been whispered of and not seen, but gradually masses of captured men in moss-green uniforms became familiar sights, for in the early days Belgium brought back fine trophies of prisoners from the front.

But soon afterwards the systematic work of military destruction began, houses and farms being demolished and trees and hedges cut to the ground so that landmarks should be removed.

It was red—red in the fields, while red streaks dyed the little streams and dykes that flowed through the meadows.

* * * * *

In the lower quarters of the towns innocent folk wondered why certain doors in certain streets were marked with a crimson cross, but others who under-

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stood the Teuton methods of organised military lust were able to explain.

They knew that the painted women and girls imprisoned behind those crimson-crossed doors were safe from pillage and murder—also (because, poor souls, of what they were!) safe from outrage!

One couldn't destroy a flower that has already been bruised and battered and bereft of sweetness, freshness and fragrance—similarly, not even drunken German soldiers could destroy the souls of painted women living in the "pleasure houses" of Belgian towns!

Yes, just as wine and food and cigars were conserved for the use of an invading army so were the women who lived—and died—by their womanhood!

For the patrols had done their work conscientiously and well. In groups of six or eight Uhlans had been dispatched to ride for miles in advance of the army for the purpose of protecting for its use whatever might be worth protecting.

And the "pleasure houses," like the wine cellars and cinema shows, had been worth protecting, hence the sign of the crimson cross, a sign which meant: "kill wives and mothers, slaughter babies, torture old men and children, but spare those who wait for us behind these doors! They are worth sparing—for the moment!"

* * * * *

But in the villages where there were no doors worth marking with crimson crosses death was dealt out almost indiscriminately.

If an old man resented the destruction of a farm which it had been his life-work to bring to its present state of fecundity and prosperity, he was shot in the mouth when he opened his lips to revolt.

If a young man sought to protect the honour of his wife a bullet or a blow from the butt end of a rifle silenced his remonstrance.

If a woman fought like a tiger-cat to save her children from being thrown up in merry sport and caught on the point of a bayonet those children were made motherless before the sport of the bayonet even began.

It was truly hell—a worse hell than the most conventional Christian has ever pictured—in Belgium!

* * * * *

And in a farmhouse situated on the outskirts of a small village called Plinstreau terror was at its height.

The old farmer was palsied with fear and his old wife and his son were shaking like branches of slender wind-swept trees, while the boy who looked after the pigs and the girl who helped old Madame Berglette scrub and scour were sobbing and shivering in the darkest corner of the barn.

Only two young women seemed able to face the situation with anything like resourcefulness and courage—these being Marie Rose (Madame Berglette's daughter) and the English lady novelist who had been boarding at the farm since the end of July for the purpose of seeing life on a Belgian farm.

The English lady novelist's name was Florence Everest, and when she returned to England she would

be married to a gentleman called Morice Mandrake. Marie Rose had heard so much about this Monsieur Morice Mandrake that she felt as though she knew him without ever having set eyes on anything more convincing than his portrait.

And to-morrow Mademoiselle Everest would go back to England among the refugees—at least she would try to go back, and Marie Rose prayed to the Holy Virgin that they would all be able to go with her.

They must all go—only it was pitiful to think of leaving the cows and chickens and ducks without anyone to feed and tend them! That nearly broke Marie Rose's brave heart.

"Perhaps, Mademoiselle, they will not come here after all. I tell Babette and Jean that they are cowards and fools to be afraid until there is real need!" said Marie Rose, speaking French—which she had learned at the village school (the old people only knew Flemish)—and addressing the English lady novelist.

"You are quite right, Marie, it is no use to think the worst before the worst comes," replied Florence Everest sturdily. (In her own heart she felt that the worst *would* come, but if Marie Rose was plucky she would be plucky too.)

"They say at Joux-Vergon terrible things have happened, Mademoiselle. The German soldiers broke into the house of Monsieur le Curé and took his money and burnt his furniture and then carried Madame away without any clothes on her body except a small petticoat to a field more than a mile distant. People

found her three hours later blinded in both eyes with her hair cut off, and laughing—laughing because she was mad! But they will not do such things here, Mademoiselle—not in Plinstreau!”

Florence did not answer. She was physically sick and words would not come to her lips.

“If they come here,” continued Marie Rose putting two red hands on two buxom well-developed hips, “I shall tell them many things, and I will let them see that it is not only the men who can fight! I have my long knife and there is very much that I can do with my long knife!”

This, of course, was idle and pitifully absurd boasting, but, as she listened, Florence felt that it was better to let the Belgian girl go on with her boasts. It made her feel brave to talk about a long knife, and what she could do with it—and it gave her strength even to think that she felt brave!

For some few moments longer they discussed preparations for the morrow's perilous journey, then Florence went up to the low whitewashed bedroom set in the sloping roof which she had occupied for over a month, and shut the door.

She wanted to be alone because she was ashamed for buoyant Marie Rose to see that her fears were as deadly as the fears of the old farmer and his wife.

She felt somehow that *they*—so quickly the word “*they*” had grown to have terrible significance!—would come to Plinstreau, because what she knew that Marie Rose did not know was that a contingent of German cavalry had that morning marched into the village of Tormael (less than five miles away) and

after a sanguinary encounter with the Belgian lancers had begun their career of pillage, murder and lust.

If they were so near as Tormael they—they——

Then suddenly thought itself came to a standstill and her mind refused to work, as human minds do refuse when the "great thing" for which they have been waiting really happens at last.

Florence heard the tramp of horses' hoofs and loud-voiced calls called in a language which was neither French nor Flemish.

"*Offen Sie die Tur!*"

She knew what that meant in German—it meant "open the door!"—it was a command for the main door of the farmhouse to be opened so that the enemy of Europe might enter!

And as Florence heard she thought only of Morice—thought of him so strongly and intensely that for a moment it made her feel as though he must be on the spot to protect her with his arms, his love, his life!

God! how deeply and dearly she loved him! She was so absolutely all he demanded she should be that for her to die before he possessed what was only and solely his would be a waste of the world's best romances!

She *mustn't die*—the German soldiers mustn't hack and mutilate and slaughter someone who was made to belong to someone else!

Now she could hear thunderings at the door, now the crash of splintering wood and the heaviness of guttural curses.

For a moment she stood irresolute, then a frenzied

scream of agony and terror made her realise that tragedies were being enacted below.

And she must go down, go down to try and make peace, and to persuade the farmer and his family calmly and meekly to supply the enemy's demands.

Only calm and meekness—not the usual equipments of the labouring peasant classes—could avert death and torture.

Besides, she must share with the others, not even for Morice's sake could she hold back from sharing with the others what must be shared!

She opened the door and went half way down the flight of wooden steps, at the bottom of which was a large square hall which served as the general sitting-room, and her heart stopped beating at what she saw.

There were sixteen or twenty of them—enormous green-clothed, helmeted men with fair cruel faces.

They seemed all to be typically Teuton and to have fair cruel faces, but there was one fairer and crueller than the rest. He was leaning against the wall and laughing insolently while Marie Rose brought from a quaint old wooden chest three small bottles of wine.

"That is no good—we want more!" cried one of the other fellows, digging Marie Rose in the ribs before lifting her under the armpits and tossing her up in the air while she screamed and kicked and made a dangerous display of white cotton stocking.

Florence dashed forward, the instinct to protect her own sex was strong, and as she did so the eyes of the fairest and cruellest of the giants turned towards her.

He looked at her—then whispered to one of his comrades :

“ *Eine Engländerin !* ”

In a second they seemed to know that she was an Englishwoman.

It was a terrible thing for them to know !

At this juncture two bottles of cognac were discovered hidden behind a huge carved tea-caddy, and one came first into the hands of the soldier with the cruellest face of all.

Instantly the mouth of the bottle was raised to his lips to be nearly half emptied before being passed on to another claimant.

For the next few moments they all drank—and drank—till suddenly the smallest and least imposing of the soldiers took up an empty flagon and hurled it at the portrait of an old man hanging on the wall.

This was the farmer's grandfather—he had been loved and revered as good peasants' progenitors are loved and revered by their descendants—and as he saw what had happened the farmer's last failing strength was used in seizing a rifle belonging to one of the invaders, and firing a shot.

He was mad when he did it, the madness of terror and fury, but that counted for nothing.

A shot had been fired by a resisting civilian—that was enough—enough——

Shrieks !—howls—shots—blood—blood and worse than blood when two of the men seized Marie Rose and—and——

Florence tried to go towards the struggling, screaming girl, but it was not possible, for she herself was

being clutched and held—held by the soldier with the fairest and cruellest of all the faces.

But the face was no longer fair—wine and spirits had heated his skin and it was crimson (crimson as the crosses on those doors!) while his grey-green eyes glowed, and gleamed, and glowed.

Now he was lurching forward with her, towards the stairs, up the stairs.

He was laughing and shouting in her ear, and once his teeth closed savagely on her neck.

“Morice! Morice! My God!”

Florence knew she was crying aloud to her Maker and her lover, but there was no help from either.

While murder and pillage went on below, Soldat Ludwig carried Florence Everest into the little white-washed bedroom under the roof.

PART I

FIRST CHAPTER

THE HOMECOMING

CHARING CROSS STATION was massed with people, only a small proportion of whom, however, were allowed to pass the barriers and go down the platform at which the refugee train from Ostend was expected to arrive.

But Morice Mandrake and Mrs. Hillyer were among that small proportion, for the reason that they were waiting to receive a traveller whose impending arrival had been announced by telegram from Dover.

"Poor dear Florence! I expect she will be very tired and quite unnerved! It will be a great relief to have her safely back again!" observed Mrs. Hillyer placidly.

Morice answered and put an equal amount of bland placidity into his response—but inside him there was raging and hammering of the heart.

She—his beloved, his pure and perfect woman—was coming back to him!

This last week had been torture and suspense too agonising for recollection, and to-day was the last

which he would have allowed to elapse without going to seek her amongst all the débris of all the battered villages of Belgium.

Despite urgent persuasions to the contrary he would have gone before had it not been for the fact of not knowing where she was (every letter had announced forthcoming changes of address without any inkling of what those addresses might chance to be) and of risking being occupied on a fruitless search in Belgium while any hour of any day she might have returned to England.

But all these brain-torturing possibilities and uncertainties were now at an end—for Florence had sent a telegram!—Florence was safe!—Florence was coming back to be his wife!

“How useful they are!—all those ladies with the white badges on their arms and their chests! Woman’s Emergency Corps, aren’t they? I think I must join that, because in a time like this everybody ought to do something to help England. I don’t think I could be an interpreter because I have forgotten all my French and I never learnt Flemish, but I’m sure I could do *something*. And those seem nice young girls with red armlets and caps, don’t they? They’ve got jugs of milk and water. Very nice! I must make inquiries about all these new—er—new organisations to help the war!”

For nearly an hour Lena Hillyer had been gently babbling in this strain, and Morice had continued to answer with a corresponding amount of inane vagueness.

But now suddenly he couldn’t bear it any longer.

If she said anything else fatuous about badges or jugs of milk he must—must *swear* at her!—yes, he must let go of all his impassive restraint and shout out a loud healthy swear!

God! fancy maundering on about her own forgotten French and unlearnt Flemish when Florence was coming back from danger—from a bombarded country where slaughter and havoc and——

God! a black funnel!—a whistle—a black curving line rounding the corner!

The train!—Florence!

* * * * *

They saw her at once.

Masses of poor chattering, sobbing and homeless peasants poured out of every compartment and streamed into the railed-off wooden space reserved for “REFUGÉES,” where food and drink and help and welcome awaited them, but though the crowd was dense Florence seemed to stand out by herself.

She was wearing a long blue coat and her air of general neatness and unemotional calm might suggest that she had just enjoyed an easy journey after passing a pleasant holiday.

Morice went up to her and took both her hands—no more, for passionate greetings should have no place on crowded railway stations.

“Thank God! my darling—oh! my God!—*thank* God!” he said, speaking so low that only Florence could hear.

She smiled at him, then gave a little laugh which seemed out of place.

Morice was not conscious of it, but that little laugh, plucky as it was, momentarily chilled him. For though every well-bred man makes quite sure that he detests and despises any display of emotion at any time, his heart resents it when a loved woman can be as restrained as himself.

Then Florence turned to her cousin and the conventional amount of kissing and shoulder-patting was got through fairly expeditiously—after which they all made their way down the platform, through the gates and into a taxi.

"I suppose, dear, it was awful—simply *awful*, wasn't it?" asked Lena mildly.

"It—it——" (Florence paused a moment to stare steadily out of the cab window—to stare at nothing) "it was too awful to talk about—*yet!*"

"Ah! of course it must have been! I expect you feel quite numbed and dazed. I know I should if I had seen farms and places burned down, and children and old men murdered, and women and girls—er—cruelly treated, wouldn't you, Morice?"

With conventional gravity Morice replied that he would, then before Mrs. Hillyer could allude to any more harrowing incidents detailed at great length in the daily press, he was calmly discussing the probability *v.* the improbability of a Zeppelin raid.

Florence averted her blank gaze from the window and glanced at him swiftly.

It was a glance half-grateful, half-inquiring, almost as though she were wondering why he was thus helping her not to talk about the war-horrors which she had passed through and left behind in Belgium.

* * * * *

When they reached Row Square, Lena Hillyer accompanied Florence up to her bedroom and suggested bathing her forehead with perfume before again turning the conversation in the direction of German atrocities committed in Belgium—a grim subject in which she appeared to have a fatuous and inexhaustible interest.

But Florence refused the perfume and again postponed the recital of Hunnish outrages.

All she wanted was a bath and tea.

Tea—after the bath—was a desperate need. But the bath must come first.

And while Lena and Florence were upstairs, Morice sat in the thoroughly well decorated and conventional drawing-room longing desperately for the moment when he and the perfect woman—who must have been created for the sole and express purpose of being *his* perfect woman!—should be alone together.

It was strange how tremendously his love for her had grown. When they parted in July he had loved her ardently and passionately, but during these weeks of separation some element almost unhuman in its strength and completeness had intensified his devotion.

She was so splendid, so pure, yet not arrogant in her purity, and so comprehending in all matters that concern the lives which men lead.

Neither more nor less than other average men Morice had "done those things which he ought not to have done," yet while conscious of his conventionally stained past, he was beginning to regard that past as though it belonged to another and entirely independent individual.

Florence's example, Florence's tolerance, Florence's affection had recreated him, and this recreated being was wholly and entirely her own.

He adored her. His need of her was the greatest need his life had ever known, and their marriage must take place without any delay. Yes, without any delay at all.

* * * * *

Half-an-hour later Mrs. Hillyer and Florence came in to tea, but it was not till an hour had elapsed that the lovers were alone.

It's true that Lena hadn't evidenced any tactful haste to take her departure, but once or twice when she had shown signs of leaving the room Florence had happened to make some remark which inevitably postponed the moment for which Morice was longing.

Of course it wasn't that Florence was trying to put off that rapturous moment—it was only that she made observations when silence would have produced happier results.

But now it was all right. There were letters which

must be written and Mrs. Hillyer had gone to write them.

She had left the room and closed the door behind her.

It was Morice's moment—the one he had been hungering for.

He got up and went across to the lounge on which Florence was seated; but as he came near her face paled and with a swift involuntary movement she raised her hands—almost as an ill-treated child raises its hands to ward off a possible blow.

But Morice did not see the movement—he only knew that the moment had come.

He knelt beside her and took her into his arms. There might have been something more unconsciously theatrical about the attitude than he would have wished, but it was the one which seemed to bring her closer to him than any other would have done.

And he wanted her close to him—close—*close*.

He kissed her, and to him it seemed that this must be the world's longest and strongest kiss.

"Let's be married at once, by special licence in three days," he said at last when words were needed to follow up the silence of kisses.

And then for the first time since her arrival Florence spoke with all her accustomed eagerness and volubility. It seemed as though the touch of human lips had thawed some crust of ice which unforgettable experiences had frozen around her heart and brain.

"Not just yet, dear—give me a few weeks to—to get normal again," she cried almost nervously. "You see that without doing anything in the least brave

or useful I have been through—er—pretty bad experiences. I am sure they have dulled whatever brain I may possess. They were such horrible sights. I couldn't *tell* you what horrible sights they were! But people forget everything and get over everything, and I'm sure if you will wait a little I—I shall get over all this and shall be—what I say—be *normal* again!”

“But come to me and let me help you to get normal or anything you like! It doesn't matter what you are so long as you are with me—so long as my perfect, *perfect* girl is all my own!”

He knew that this was quite on a par with extravagant novelette love-making, but he couldn't help it and he didn't care. All his life he had kept his feelings in and now he was going to let them go—to let them go when he was with Florence.

“Why do you call me your ‘perfect, perfect girl’?” she asked suddenly.

“Because you are exactly all that I've ever wanted my wife to be—exactly what——” (he touched her cheek here, and laughed) “exactly what the Quaker grandmother and lawyer grandfather would have wanted her to be. You are as beautiful as we all wanted her to be, as clever as we all wanted her to be, as good as we all wanted her to be, and as pure as we all wanted her to be. You are just what I said—my perfect, perfect girl.”

Florence heard him to the end and then she nodded her head almost reflectively, and once again looked vacantly into space as though in the heart of nothing she was looking for something.

"Well, just wait a little, just a little while," she said at last.

And with that Morice was forced to be content.

But he knew it would not be long.

He understood women—or thought he did—and he felt that it was in his power to make Florence realise that delayed happiness is one of the world's greatest pities.

SECOND CHAPTER

"WHAT SHALL I DO?"

AUGUST ended, September passed and October began, and still Morice and Florence were going to be married "in a little while."

For, despite the fact of understanding women—or thinking he did—Morice had not yet been able to make his future wife realise the pity of delay sufficiently to induce the hastening on of their own wedding.

She still felt "weak and nervy" after the shock, and now she complained of insomnia and suggested that a prolonged stay in the country—a species of "rest cure"—might be beneficial.

And certainly her looks confirmed in a measure her complaints, for her face had grown dragged and pale, and there were indications of lines reaching from her nose to her chin—those unbeautiful lines which are inevitable indications of mental tribulation.

Sometimes she rubbed those lines mechanically, and one morning, after a sleepless night, her fingers travelled backwards and forwards across her cheek with such strenuous velocity that she became suddenly conscious of the fact that she was hurting herself.

And that was quite useless—it was quite useless to hurt her face because her mind was distraught.

But she mustn't allow her mind to be distraught. It was a mind above the level of average feminine minds, and therefore it should be ready to deal calmly with life's difficulties as they arose.

The present crisis was one which needed all Florence's best and sanest thoughts—better and saner thoughts, even, than those which she put into the most successful novels she had ever written.

She ceased rubbing the lines down her cheeks, forced a placid expression on to her face and sat up a little in bed—the sitting-up preparatory to a brave and determined escape from the allurements of sheets and blankets.

For some moments she remained quite motionless, evidently forcing mental concentration to her aid, then suddenly—when thought had laid plans for action—she got up and stood on the edge of the bed before jumping with almost exaggerated agility to the ground.

It was a novel way of getting up, but one tended to banish instantly any remains of early-morning drowsiness and to inspire feelings of invigoration and energy.

* * * * *

When Florence had bathed and dressed she went into her own study adjoining the bedroom and rang for breakfast.

But when breakfast arrived she couldn't eat it, therefore egg and bacon (at war-time prices!) were

wasted, and ten minutes later she went out, fortified only by weak tea and dry toast.

A short walk brought her to a station, which she entered before immediately making her way to a telephone call box.

"Paddington 010," she said, putting her lips to the transmitter, regardless of moisture and germs left by the last speaker.

With unusually little delay she was requested to insert "two pennies and turn the handle," after which sounded a voice proceeding from No. 4, Canal Mansions, Maida Vale.

"Can I speak to Mrs. Alway?" demanded Florence, when the preliminary "hallos" were concluded.

"It is Mrs. Alway speaking."

"Is that you, Eileen? Oh! it's I—Florence——"

"Oh! Florence, you dear thing! I wondered why I was forgotten and what I'd done!"

"You weren't forgotten, Eileen. It's only that I've been busy and the days are so full, you know. I'll come in directly you've got time for me, but in the meanwhile I've rung up to ask you the address of a woman doctor who you said was so good. Someone I know—she's a man-hater, I think, and likes to deal with her own sex when she can!—wants to consult her. Can you tell me her name and where she is to be found?"

"Oh! yes—she's a dear! Dr. Eva Dunstable is her name, and she lives at 10, Ritt Terrace, St. John's Wood!"

"Thank you, Eileen—very much—and——"

"Yes, but wait a minute—you shan't ring off with—"

out saying when you will come and see me! Look here, I am all alone to-day—will you come and lunch at one? *Do*, there's a dear! I want to hear all your news and to tell you a bit of mine. Will you come?"

Florence considered a full moment.

"Yes, I will," she replied, when the moment of consideration had adjusted the situation.

"You dear! Then at one o'clock I'll have a burnt chop ready for you, so mind you come along. Ta-ta!"

* * * * *

When Florence had hung up the receiver she looked in the telephone directory—among the D's—then once again put it (the receiver) to her ear.

"Paddington 0006."

The usual wait—the usual pennies—then:

"Is that Paddington 0006?"

"Yes, madam."

"Will you ask Dr. Eva Dunstable if she will be free to see me in a little over half-an-hour?"

"Yes, madam. What name, please?"

"Er—Mrs. Grange."

"Thank you, madam. Will you please hold the line a moment, and I'll ask the doctor."

Two minutes of silence, then:

"Are you there, madam?"

"Yes."

"Yes, Dr. Dunstable will be free to see you, madam, any time within the next hour."

"Thank you. Tell her, then, that I will be along shortly, please."

"Yes, madam—thank you."

* * * * *

On leaving the telephone-box and the station Florence walked along swiftly until, after passing innumerable shops that she didn't want, she at last reached a shop that she did want.

It was a jeweller's shop, and the name over the door was "JACOB."

For a second Florence hesitated, then, succeeding in looking more matter-of-fact than she had ever looked before, she opened the door and entered the shop.

Five minutes later she came out again—came out putting on her left-hand glove, beneath which glittered the brazen gold of a five-shilling wedding-ring.

It was a horribly brazen-looking ring.

* * * * *

"Taxi!"

The call was sufficiently clear and penetrating to make itself heard above the rumble of a passing motor-bus, and the driver of a green taxi pulled up smartly exactly where he was required to pull up.

"No. 10, Ritt Terrace, St. John's Wood," directed Florence.

The flag went down, the bell rang, and the "fare" got in. Then the taxi wheeled round, while Florence was wishing vaguely that she had hailed a vehicle which had been painted blue or brown—anything but green.

It was very foolish, but she had never been able to break herself of the superstition about green.

Green of any shade—bright green like the taxi, or grey-green like German military uniforms—always seemed to bring disaster.

And presently all the world would be green with spring-time leaves and grasses, and it might be that the spring would bring disaster too!

But Florence wouldn't think any more about seasons or superstitions just now—she would just think about Morice, and how completely she loved him and how completely he loved her, and how it would be a crime against all the God-made laws of human love and human sympathy if anything were allowed to prevent their marriage.

They were two people who needed each other, whose lives would be wrecked if spent apart—and such unions which are largely spiritual must not be dissolved.

Yes, Florence would think persistently and hopefully about the future which she and her lover would spend together.

She would think of it all the way to St. John's Wood.

* * * * *

In due course the taxi pulled up opposite a large solid grey house, and when Florence alighted and paid the fare there was a brilliant flush of excitement on her face.

Also her knees trembled as she went up the paved entrance to the door, and her hand shook as she rang the bell.

In a moment the door was opened by a trim parlour-maid with an encouraging manner.

"Can I see Dr. Dunstable?"

"What name, please, madam?"

"Er—er——" (heavens! What name had she given? What name had she invented?)

"Oh! is it Mrs. Grange, madam?—the lady who spoke on the telephone?"

(All the thanks to the trim parlourmaid! She had helped matters out!)

"Yes, that is it—I made an appointment with Dr. Dunstable."

"Quite right, yes, madam. Dr. Dunstable will be ready to see you in one moment. Will you please come this way?"

And Florence went—into a tastefully-decorated waiting-room, on the centre-table of which were current periodicals and fresh flowers.

It was a room to feel happy in, and hopeful.

Florence's heart lightened as she entered.

* * * * *

Exactly half an hour later "Mrs. Grange" (it seemed to Florence that for the rest of her life she would think of herself as "Mrs. Grange"!) left Dr. Eva Dunstable's house and walked aimlessly down the road.

Her face, which had been flushed with excitement, was now livid and grey-shaded, and her eyes stared unseeingly at everything.

"Good God! what shall I do?" she whispered, feeling that words were forced from her lips, even though there was no one to hear them. "Oh! my God! what shall I do?"

THIRD CHAPTER

CONFIDENCES

IN an hour's time it seemed as though Florence had traversed the whole of the north-west of London. For she had walked and walked and walked as though never could there be any end to her wanderings, till at last she made her way to a large red brick block of flats in Maida Vale.

She had arranged to lunch with Eileen Alway, therefore she might as well lunch with her.

She must lunch somewhere. There was nothing to be gained by not lunching—for, after all, things were no different now from what they were yesterday.

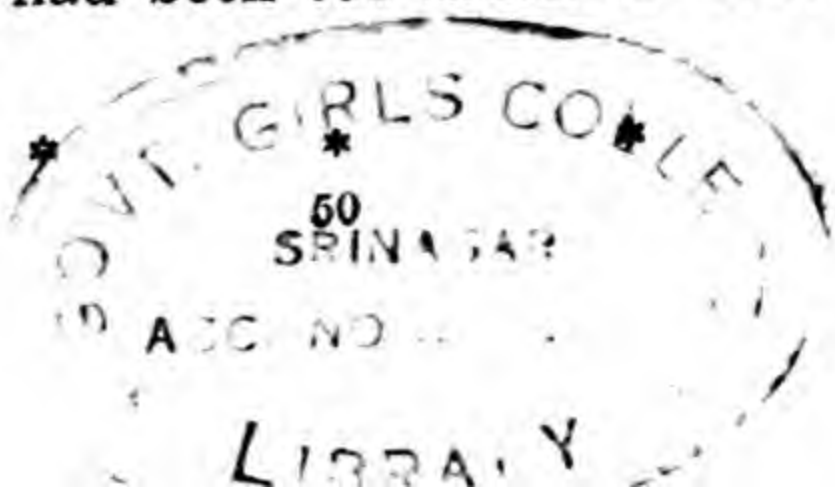
It was only now that she knew for certain—oh! God! yes, she knew for certain now!

Directly the door was opened at No. 4, Canal Mansions, Eileen Alway rushed out into the hall.

"Oh! my dear! how late you are! I thought you were never coming!" she cried.

Florence looked at her—almost smiled—then slipped down silently on to the long Turkey rug thrown cross-wise across the entrance hall.

The morning had been too much for her. She had fainted.



When Florence returned to consciousness she found herself lying on the cushioned lounge in Eileen Alway's boudoir with a handkerchief soaked in eau de Cologne stretched across her forehead and smelling salts being held to her nostrils.

"You poor old dear! Are you better now? Whatever made you faint like that?"

These were the first words that reached her ears, and as she heard them Florence thereupon realised the necessity for keeping herself and her emotions absolutely in check.

She must never allow herself to faint again: she must never do anything that should cause people to ask questions.

Eileen had just said "Whatever made you faint like that?"—no one must ever again have cause to put such a question or to wonder.

Florence always believed that she had trained herself to have control over her own mind. Well, now that control must be exercised so forcibly as to have effect upon her body also.

She must not faint, or tremble or even look pale. She must carry the thing through.

Instantly she sat up—and laughed.

"I'm ashamed of myself, Eileen—I'm frightfully ashamed of myself," she answered, throwing aside the perfume-soaked handkerchiefs and settling her damped hair. "I don't know what's the matter with me unless it's—biliousness! I know it's terribly unromantic to be bilious, but last night I ate one entire pound of *marrons glacés*, and ever since I've felt as though my head belonged to someone

else. Try to forget it—it is so out of date and unjustifiable to faint!”

Eileen Alway laughed the laugh of a very happy young woman.

“Quite unjustifiable of *you*,” she said. “You young spinsters have no right to little exhibitions of that description. If it had been *me*—well, that would have been quite another matter!”

Florence sat up and put her feet to the ground.

“How—what do you mean?” she asked sharply.

“I mean, my dear, that in a few months I am going to be very busy presenting Horace with a son and heir! You *do* congratulate me, don’t you?”

“Of course—I—do.”

“Oh! do be more enthusiastic, Florence dear! I know I can’t expect you to sympathise fully with me because you can’t realise what a wonderful thing it is to know you are going to give the world something which *lives* — *lives* — but all the same, do say lots of nice things to me! Motherhood—*anyhow, anyway*—is glorious!”

“No, no—not anyhow,—not anyway,” murmured Florence dully.

“Yes—*anyhow*! I’d rather be one of these poor nuns or Belgian farm girls one reads about in the papers—those who are expecting to be mothers of German soldiers’ children—than not be a mother at all! I never realised the strength of the maternal instinct until now! Can’t you realise what I mean?”

Suddenly Florence got up and threw out both arms. It was a deliberately dramatic gesture,

for there are moments of stupendous stress and strain when drama becomes a purely natural outlet.

"I *can't* realise," she almost shouted. "I *can't* realise because I am suffering as they suffer—as the nuns and Belgian girls suffer! *I am* expecting a child—the child of a German soldier!"

* * * * *

Eileen Alway gasped and nearly shouted—then she pulled herself together and managed the situation with supreme tact and discretion. She sympathised, but not too much, and by reasonable discussion of the subject, gradually got Florence to a calmer frame of mind.

"Why don't you tell this nice man you are engaged to?—tell him right away," she suggested with intentional lightness.

Florence took up the cue of her tone—for her mind was a schooled one and responded readily.

"Morice is the one man in the world whom it would be impossible to tell—he loved me partly because I was the absolutely pure woman he had been looking for all his life," she answered quickly.

"But there's no difference now, my dear. Your *soul's* the same—it's only a hideous, cruel accident. A soldier's wife wouldn't love her husband any less because he'd lost a limb in battle, so why should your Morice be different? It's the same thing—one of the criminal tragedies of war."

Florence shook her head sadly. The arguments were sound, but she knew they didn't apply. She understood the inner heart of the man who loved

her—understood, even, the dormant strain of cruelty in his nature which might, and probably would, never be brought to the surface unless exceptional circumstances dragged it from its lair.

But the present circumstances were tragically exceptional and they would expose that strain of cruelty. She couldn't bear Morice Mandrake's cruelty.

"No, I can't tell Morice—he mustn't know," said Florence after a pause.

"Will you give him up, then?" asked Eileen.

"No, I can't do that—I can't give him up."

"Then, dearie, what *will* you do?"

Florence didn't answer, she only looked at her with eyes that were very wide open and expressionless.

And a few minutes later they went in to lunch.

FOURTH CHAPTER

THE STAR'S MESSAGE

It was a long way from Maida Vale to Kensington, but Florence set out to walk every step of the distance.

Neither taxi, train nor omnibus should lure her into their restful shelter: she would walk—walk—and go on walking.

It was past three when she left Canal Mansions, and it seemed that before she got through half her pilgrimage daylight was beginning to fade.

But dark or light, warm or cold, day or evening, she would walk—and walk—and walk.

All the way along the Edgware Road and Oxford Street she tried to recall cases in which young women had been placed unhappily as she was placed and what had been the upshot of it all.

There was a lodging-house servant who worked for a sister of the Hillyers' housekeeper. What had happened to her?

Ah! yes—yes!—it was awful! She had killed both the child and herself!

Then there was a young governess in Cambridge. But she was all right. The man had married her, and six months afterwards she refused to take a cook from a Home for Fallen Women.

(" Fallen Women ! " That was a grotesque phrase ! As though someone had slipped on a piece of orange peel or a banana skin ! Florence had always thought it a most absurd expression !)

Yes, and there was another girl—a yellow-haired young actress who had confided in Florence. And she—well, she had got out of it all right !

Yes, the yellow-haired actress had got out of it all right !

* * * * *

Along Bond Street and Piccadilly Florence tried to imagine exactly what Morice would say, and how he would say it if calmly and deliberately she told him the truth.

But not even her imagination—the super-trained imagination of the novelist—could help her there.

One moment she thought one thing, and the next something entirely different.

He would hate her—hate her passionately and intensely as clean men hate noisome beasts—but exactly how that hatred would evidence itself wasn't easy to picture.

Then while trudging from Piccadilly towards Knightsbridge and Brompton Road it was possible to consider another aspect of the case—to consider what would occur if she said nothing and agreed to Morice's desire for an immediate marriage.

That might be done, and without exposure, but if it was, every year, month, week, day and minute of the future would be hell. It would be hell every time Morice kissed the child—hell if (supposing it

were a boy) it was named after him—hell when it called him “Father”—hell when he paid for its education—hell all, *all* the time!

Other women could, and did, face similar circumstances with equanimity—indeed some of them hugged and relished their secret and even confided it with gusto to some safe bosom friend who had more or less put *herself* in *their* power—but Florence's nature wasn't effervescent enough for that.

She was too romantic, too idealistic, too doggedly conscientious.

* * * * *

At last as she drew near the end of her pitiful pilgrimage, it seemed as though she never could leave off walking. Actually she hadn't come very far, but to anybody—like herself—accustomed to a more or less sedentary life it was as though she had performed the world's greatest pedestrian feat.

And now she felt sure that when she reached the house it would be impossible to keep still—and her brain would be always walking, even if her limbs kept still.

But to-morrow she would do the same, and the next day, and the day after—and she would ride and run and dance until she succumbed from exhaustion. . . .

Then at last it was over and she was crossing the threshold of No. 10, Ritt Terrace to be told by the servant who admitted her that—but she couldn't hear what the servant said.

So exhausted was she that she simply could not hear.

"Oh! yes—very well," she answered mechanically before ascending the stairs and going straight to her study on the first floor.

It was cosy here with the lamps unlighted and the fireglow flickering on the walls—so cosy and bright looking that if she were to sit down with a book it might be possible to forget that she and tragedy were coming closer together with every second that passed.

* * * * *

"I have been patient, darling—I have been very, very patient!"

So he was here!—actually here and speaking to her—was the loved lover whose image, mixed up with horrible forebodings, was never absent from her mind.

"And I couldn't go without seeing you—it is one of the days when I *must* see you—so I waited. Darling, come to me! It is nearly forty-eight hours since I kissed you!"

And then his arms were round her before, together, they sat on a low-cushioned seat and gave themselves up to the spontaneous rapture of the embrace.

Florence closed her eyes and just let herself forget, then *made* herself forget.

This was such a satisfying happiness that it seemed as though—good God! fancy even playing at being happy for the briefest part of a second when every day gone by made one day nearer to the terrifying end!

Yes, every day was one day gone—one day nearer the birth of an Enemy's child!

An Enemy's low-bred child who was *her* child—and she was lying in her English lover's arms!

"Darling, I have stayed this afternoon to tell you I can't wait any longer." (He was whispering now in her ear as though he thought that by so doing the definite intention of the words would be more easily comprehensible.) "You are so completely part of me now that I feel as though my life had always been absolutely empty of women except for you. In my soul I am absolutely your husband and you are absolutely my wife. My love for you has made me as—as pure as you are yourself. Whatever follies I may have committed in the past are wiped away because of my adoration for you—when we marry it will be a pure man marrying a pure woman!"

And the mother of Soldat Ludwig's unborn child did not speak a word.

She was letting herself go with the rapture of the moment.

Besides, there must be some way out—somehow.

"Florence, my heart, will you promise that it shall be in three weeks?"

And lying there with her cheek pressed against his throat, she promised.

It should be in three weeks!

* * * * *

An hour later Morice had gone and less than an hour after that Florence again left the house.

And though her physical fatigue had reached almost unbearable limits she didn't know it—positively she didn't know because, for that one night

at least, her well-balanced, well-ordered mind had become temporarily out of gear.

Yes, to-night she was mad—without wisdom, religion, conscience or anything else that keeps women so astoundingly brave and so astoundingly patient.

But to-night she need not walk all the way—she could take a taxi which would put her down in the hideous sordid locality which drains all the lowness and sordidness of half-a-dozen pretentious neighbourhoods.

So Florence hailed a taxi and gave directions to be taken somewhere near where she wanted to go.

The taxi wheeled round, went on, then stopped where its driver had been instructed to stop, at the corner of a dingy dark road which, somehow, seemed darker than any of the other war-darkened roads.

Florence alighted, paid the fare, turned down the dark road which curved like a C, and walked on until she came to No. 20, where there was a brass plate affixed to the gate.

"Dr. Horatio Smith."

Yes, that was the name which the yellow-haired actress had mentioned, and—and——

Florence stared at that brass plate, until it seemed as though her gaze was being drawn up to reach the skies.

Above the war-darkened world a star was shining with brave beautiful brilliance—a star which was part of heaven.

And heaven is the home of all human consciences which have not been forgotten by God.

H.C. No. 29

Florence just looked at that star until tears flooded her eyes and choked her throat.

Then she turned away, hailed the next available taxi, and gave instructions to be taken to 00, St. James' Street.

The flat she wanted was No. 7, B.

It was the flat in which Morice Mandrake lived.

FIFTH CHAPTER

A CONFESSION IN ST. JAMES' STREET

MORICE MANDRAKE sat in his chambers smoking a pipe.

After leaving Florence, he had dined with a man and discussed the possible carrying out of a topically philanthropic scheme, then he had come straight on home.

For, a very certain thing it is that when a man is seriously and definitely in love he has no desire to seek the social haunts of his fellow creatures.

His profession, his business, his aims and aspirations may still interest him as keenly as before, but the lighter side of life seems unspeakably vapid and empty.

So Morice sat in one of the largest chairs in London, blowing out cool, blue smoke, and thinking wholly tender, strong and satisfying thoughts concerning the woman who, in three weeks, would be his wife.

She was everything he had ever wanted, his heart's dearest to be, and when, in the future, she gave him brave sons and beautiful daughters he would feel that he had got out of life the very best that life had got to give.

The paternal instinct was very strong within him—at least it had become so since Florence and he had relinquished dual personalities to become one individual—anyhow, so far as soul and thought and spirit were concerned.

(For if a man really loves a woman as his Creator intended him to do, the reverent and passionate desire to give the world of their best burns strongly within him.)

* * * * *

Dreamily Morice blew the smoke from between his lips, enjoying the unusual satisfaction of feeling perfectly content with things as they were, till suddenly the hard sharp sound of the little brass knocker being rapped on the highly-polished front door disturbed his reverie.

And he must either open the door himself or leave it unopened—anyhow, until midnight, at which hour Tonge (his valet) was due to return from a boxing match.

Inclination suggested that the knock should remain unnoticed—politeness suggested that it should be attended to.

Politeness triumphed, and Morice went out into the small square lobby, and opened the door.

“Florence! My darling!”

The greeting was passionately rapturous, yet conventionality and caution (inherited respectively from the Quaker grandmother and lawyer grandfather) caused Morice to stand by the door without asking his future wife to enter.

But almost forcibly she threw him aside.

"You must let me come in—I must speak to you," she said. And the next moment she had hurried past him and reached the sitting-room beyond.

He followed, and thought she had never looked more sweetly a girl and more perfectly a woman.

The grey costume she was wearing showed all the budding ripeness of her figure, and beneath a small grey hat her sand-gold hair and little flushed face were exquisite.

Despite the overplus of women in the world, it was a gladsome triumph to own this one particular woman.

Morice went up to her, and took both her hands, for here—alone in his chambers late in the evening—he would not permit himself the rapture of any warmer embrace.

His gentlemanly prejudices were quite old-fashioned.

"I am desperately glad to see you, darling, but—er—why have you come?" he asked, looking at her lips and thinking of three weeks ahead—when she would be his wife.

"I've come to tell you something," she answered steadily.

"Anything nice, dear?"

"No—not nice."

"Not to say you have found out something about me that makes me undesirable as a husband?" (He was so sure of her and of himself that it came easily to chaff even when she looked desperately serious.)

"No, nothing about you—it's about me."

"Then, darling, it must be something quite sweet and quite beautiful." (His tone was still tender and light, but somewhere a note of apprehensiveness might have been audible.)

"No, it is something very sad—very sad and very dreadful."

"What is it, Florence? Tell me quickly, darling. I can't do with suspense where you are concerned. Tell me."

"Yes, Morice, I'll tell you, and—and when I tell you I want you to be very kind to me. If you could possibly imagine the awful horror of what I have suffered you couldn't help being kind to me."

"Of course—my love—but——"

"Then listen!" Here she slipped her hands away from his, and clasped them behind her. It was as though while speaking she wanted to be as free from his influence as possible. "You know I was in Belgium—at a farmhouse in Plinstreau—when the war broke out?"

"Of course I know!"

"And you know that the German soldiers came to the farm——"

"Yes, of course——"

"Well, listen, Morice. Yes, the German soldiers came, but though they did not kill any old people or children in that particular farmhouse where I was staying they—they did not spare the young women."

"Florence, what do you mean? My God!—what do you mean?"

"I mean that Marie Rose—old Monsieur Berglette's

daughter—and I were the two young women on the premises—and they did not spare us. One of the soldiers—I think his face was the most brutal of all—has ruined my life. Marie Rose is all right, but I—oh! Morice, I am expecting a child by a drunken German soldier!”

* * * * *

Either a terrible silence or a terrible outbreak of sound must have followed.

It was the former, and for a full moment nothing could be heard except the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece.

To make an effort at describing what was passing through Morice Mandrake's mind would be futile.

At first it seemed as though he couldn't think at all, then the next he was thinking every thought that it was possible for a man to think in the circumstances.

For one brief second he thought of—*murder!* and he looked at Florence's beautiful white throat as he thought.

Then he looked at the tragic pitifulness of her eyes, and once again became more man than demon.

“Why didn't you tell me before?” he asked at last.

“I don't know. I had been hoping——”

“What?”

“I don't know.”

He nodded. Then after a minute he spoke again, almost weakly and stupidly.

"It would have been better if you had told me at once."

"Yes, but I wasn't sure——"

"Yes, but, anyhow, you must have told me about—the thing itself."

"I suppose I must, but I——"

She broke off here, and they were silent again.

They were terrible thoughts that Morice was thinking during that silence.

At last Florence spoke again. He was so broken that she felt that the strength of her own dauntless womanhood was being called upon to help him bear the blow.

"Of course, dear, we will say 'good-bye' now—anyhow, for the present. In—in time to come we can meet again, and be friends," she said gently.

The tragic imitation of a laugh left his lips.

"As though you and I could ever be friends!" he muttered. "No, not friendship for two people who are one person! Either everything—or nothing."

"Yes, I see what you mean—of course, I *do* understand. It must be nothing, then. It is terribly sad for us, but the war is making sadness everywhere, and there are—I suppose there are—people who suffer more bitterly than we suffer." She waited a moment, then made a slight movement towards the door. "I'll go now, Morice, dear. I only came at all because suddenly I felt that I had the strength to tell you, and if I had waited even another hour that strength would have gone. Oh! my dear, do pity me!—do, do say that you pity me with all your heart!"

This last appeal was so unspeakably pathetic, so pitifully feminine, and for a moment it made a man realise that there was a woman to be considered as well as himself.

"My God! Florence, it's the most hellish thing that has ever happened in the world. Pity you!—I daren't think enough of—of—I daren't think enough to pity you as——"

Then abruptly he ceased speaking, because suddenly all Florence's fine strength had given way with her sad, sad longing for pity.

She had leant sideways with both elbows resting on the mantelpiece, and she was crying weakly as women do cry when the world seems all against them.

She was so physically weary, so worn with anguish, so frightened, so utterly alone, and in her inmost heart perhaps she had hoped that love, for her, might have proved what we all want love to be, but which it so rarely is—something so much of heaven that it puts right everything wrong on earth.

Vaguely she had hoped, and almost believed, that he would have gathered her into his arms and, for the moment, have been lover and mother all in one.

Yes, without knowing it, she had been hoping this ever since the shine of a star had lighted her on the road to Truth and Pluck.

But it was not to be. He felt exactly as it was natural he should feel, yet——.

Yet how absurd are human emotions as well as human convention!

Had Florence been the *widow* of a German soldier with years of ardent memories behind her, no man who loved her would have turned away. But because of one bitter hour of terror—which, mercifully, was almost madness and oblivion—she was regarded as something tainted and revolting.

She *felt* that this was how Morice was regarding her, and even while she felt it the bitter, absurd, and criminal injustice which attends every circumstance connected with Nature's laws of Sex and Society stung her through and through.

But this was not a time for arguing about, or revolting at, things as they are—it was the time to weep, because heart-weariness, soul-weariness, and body-weariness made it impossible not to weep.

The way of women is very hard—so incomprehensibly hard that great compensations must await them at the other end—God's Great Other End!

* * * * *

And as Florence wept, Morice watched her immovably, and almost interestedly, as he might have watched an actress playing an emotional part in a dramatic stage scene.

It wasn't that he didn't wish to pity and comfort her with touch and caress—it was just that he *couldn't* do it.

She seemed so far away from him—farther than if he had been seated in the last row of the stalls and she had been playing behind the footlights.

He couldn't cross the chasm that was dividing them,

and if for a second he made an effort to do so the cold withered ghost hands of the Quaker grandmother, and the hard, long ghost fingers of the lawyer grandfather, held him back.

She was standing there and, beside her, he seemed to see the figure of a German soldier in his dull grey-green uniform. The figure of that *soldat* would always be there—if he were awake or asleep, drunk or sober, mad or sane, he would always, *always* see Florence shadowed by a grey-green uniform!

She was crying bitterly, but he couldn't go to her. He might have been chained or petrified for all the movement he was able to make.

How milky white was the little stretch of skin behind her ear down her neck! He had often kissed it—God! to think that he had often kissed it when now it would be absolutely impossible for him to stretch out one finger towards her!

If it had been only her herself—if the ghastly incident had left no results behind—he might in time have trained himself to think of her only as HER. But she was not only herself—she was everything that a lover and a patriot must loathe her for being!

Oh! if only he *could* go to her—if only——

But it was too late now—at least it was almost too late, because she was making an effort to check her sobs, and slowly she was going towards the door.

And Morice couldn't stop her—he *couldn't*. As she was going—white-faced and wet-eyed—she must go!

No one to pity her, no one to comfort her, no one to utter one word of cheer and hope—yes, it was very sad, but she must go.

And she went.

SIXTH CHAPTER

THE FUTURE SET IN ORDER

For some time after Florence had gone, Morice's condition of agonised apathy continued—then suddenly he saw lying on the ground something which looked like a ball.

He picked it up and found it to be a pair of gloves—two little gloves rolled up and pressed together with such closeness as to suggest anguish on the part of the person who had crushed them with such force.

They were small gloves, perfumed, delicately tinted gloves—and they belonged to Florence.

Lingeringly he held them, and as the faint sweet odour which they emitted reached his nostrils he became conscious of a sensation of relaxed tension.

It was as though this contact with something inanimate—yet fully permeated with the owner's personality—had eased some strain that had been binding up his brain and heart with iron bands.

Florence was in the deepest and most acute misery, yet he had made no effort to comfort her.

Florence had been his beloved—his dearest on earth—his perfect woman who was all he had ever wanted any woman to be—and yet he had let her weep and sob without touch or word of tenderness.

It was a horrible, hideous thing which had happened—*yet she was not to blame!*

God in heaven! this was the first moment he had thought of that! Actually and truly he hadn't thought of it before, but had been unconsciously regarding the appalling thing which had come about in the light of a feminine fault—failing—frailty!

God, what a brute, what an unspeakable brute, he had been!

Florence—an innocent, pure woman—had been a *victim* of the most devilish of all the war tragedies which made the world of to-day akin to hell—she had been a victim, while he—yes, in all the episodes with which his man's life had been decorated, what had he been?

A sinless victim? No, a deliberately self-indulgent sensualist!

For his own pleasure, his own satisfaction, *he* had strayed from the straight narrow road of virtue, while Florence had been a helpless, unprotected victim!

It was terrible to think of how he had let her go—how he had failed her—how he must have killed all hope and trust that had ever been in her heart!

* * * * *

They must be married.

Nothing must alter that; everything must be just as it had been arranged except, instead of marrying in three weeks, they must marry in three days—by special licence—without a second's more delay than was legally necessary.

Other victims of war were comforted and helped

and sustained. So it must be the same with Florence.

Besides, did he want to let her go ?

To touch her, to kiss her would cause him to feel sensations that would be indescribably morbid and almost unbearable—yet to lose her would be——

What would it be ?

Why, to lose her would be *impossible* !

They so entirely belonged to each other and were so completely bound up in each other that severance would be against the laws of Destiny.

For, after all, it could be a marriage of the mind—of companionship——

Ah ! but there was something being forgotten—something that Morice had omitted to take into consideration.

There was the child !

There was the child of a drunken German soldier who would be a living testimony to the horrors of war !

He (Morice) would be forced to bring up the offspring of a low-bred alien enemy as his child, and every time he saw it laughing and romping—as childhood must laugh and romp, no matter how tragically its existence be accomplished—he would see a picture—always a picture in which stood out a grey-green uniform and a woman with sand-gold hair—*his* woman—*his wife*——

No, there must be no more thinking that would again weaken resolution ! Resolution must be clinched without another chance for weakening determination.

Besides, Florence mustn't go—it wouldn't be possible to lose Florence !

* * * * *

Morice went to the telephone and quickly got the number he asked for.

"Let me speak to Miss Everest, please," he said.

A whirr—a scrape—then he was "put on" to Florence's study.

"Hullo !"

"Yes ? Who is that ?" (The voice was tired with tears.)

"It is I—Morice. Is that Florence ?"

"Yes, it is—it is Florence."

"I must see you, dear—I must see you now—so I shall take a taxi and come round at once. I shall be with you before eleven. Tell them to show me up to your study, won't you ?"

"Yes, Morice, I will—but—but is it any good ?"

"It's every good. Nothing else is any good—for me ! I am coming now—at once !"

That was all—nothing else to be said over the wires when they would be together so soon.

Morice thanked heaven that he had been fairly quick in making up his mind to go.

* * * * *

When he arrived everything was as he requested. He was shown up into Florence's study without any delay, to find her sitting by a small, semi-dead fire, and wearing a loose white gown that made her appear pathetically young, feminine and helpless.

She looked up as he came in, and smiled—just the gentle smile of greeting which a tired woman so often forces herself to give when she feels too weary to speak.

Morice came right up to her.

“My dear, can you forgive me? I didn’t know what I was doing just now—at least, what I was *not* doing,” he said firmly and steadily.

“There wasn’t anything to forgive, Morice, because I know really you were sorry for me, only you weren’t ready to think of that just then,” she answered gently—more gently than it was her usual custom to speak.

Morice came nearer. He wanted to touch her hair—her cheek—but that couldn’t be just yet.

“Florence, we will be married on Thursday—to-day is Monday—so a special licence can be got and everything settled for Thursday,” he said.

Florence shook her head.

“No, dear, don’t make such a sacrifice—it isn’t worth it,” she answered.

“Yes, it is worth it, not for your sake, but mine. If you go out of my life it will be the end of everything for me. I couldn’t get over that, but I could—get—over—the—the other.”

“I don’t think you could, Morice. Just think of these next few months—and then *afterwards*! Oh! we could neither of us bear it—neither of us, dear!”

Morice thought very profoundly for a moment, while a heavy frown of deep concentration lined his forehead.

There was one plan which, if carried out, might make the gruesome situation almost possible—in fact,

in the future, when time and custom had thrown their filmy veils across the hideously sharp outlines of bygone realities, there might be perfect happiness once more.

* * * * *

"Dearest" (he *would* call her that—he would make himself do it)—"will you listen to something I have to suggest?"

"Of course, Morice."

"I believe if we carried out this idea that we could put our lives right again."

"Tell me!"

"Let us be married on Thursday by special licence, and directly afterwards you go away to the country. I'll take a furnished cottage for you, and engage a servant and respectable nurse-companion—all that can easily be managed in three days—and then you go down by an afternoon train."

"Yes—yes"—(some of the hopeless weariness was leaving her face)—"yes, and then I stay there until—until everything is over—in the spring——"

"Yes, you come back in the spring—by which time I will have got a house and staff of servants ready to receive you—and then it will seem to us as though nothing had ever been. For that must be our arrangement—that never, *never* will we speak or even vaguely allude, to what has happened. You will be my wife, and only as my wife shall I think of you—I shall spend three months in training my mind to think exactly what I demand that it shall think. Of course as regards the——"

Quickly Florence put up her hand to prevent the sentence being finished, then once again she spoke with something like a return of her bygone eagerness and vitality.

"There is no need for us to discuss that," she said, "because my own income will be enough to make ample provision for—for the child. I shall arrange for it to remain in the country—with some responsible people—and of course I shall go down often to see that everything is right. But we will never allude to that any more than to anything else. There will be no need to do so."

"Do you mean, Florence, that you *swear* never to let me hear one word which shall remind me that you are the mother of any child but my child? That no matter what occurs—not *excepting any contingency whatever*—you will never speak to me upon the subject—never even hint——"

"I swear that I will take full charge of that responsibility, and that from the day of the child's birth until the end of our lives nothing shall ever happen to make you realise that it exists. Of course I shall do my duty and pay frequent visits to the country, but beyond the fact of my being away for a day now and then, nothing shall ever remind you that—that I was one of the victims of war!"

"Then, my dear, thank God, everything is settled!"

* * * * *

Yes, everything was settled, and, being settled and their being alone together and lovers who would

marry in three days, it was only natural that there should be an embrace.

Morice went nearer towards her and half held out his arms.

He longed passionately to touch her, to kiss her, yet—yet——

But in a second Florence put an end to his anguished decision by getting up suddenly and slipping out of his reach.

“Not now, Morice,” she cried almost joyously—for joy comes back so quickly when the future is alight with hope. (It is always the future which matters—never really the present!) “No, not now—not till—till the spring! When I come back, everything will be as it was, and we shall be so glad to kiss each other and belong to each other! I know it will be a golden, glorious spring-time, and we shall be happier then than if it were not for all this sorrow now. But we will wait. It must be like a long sleep—a period of nothingness—until we both awake to live our perfect life together! You will let me know where and what time on Thursday—we shall meet then—we shall part directly it is over—and I shall not communicate with you in any way until I—I come home. If I should be ill or anything should happen the nurse will send you a wire, but while everything goes on well you will hear nothing until there is a message to say that—that your wife is coming home!”

And as Florence finished speaking she smiled gladly as a girl smiles when she has set her life in joyous order.

Everything had come back to her—hope, eagerness,

enthusiasm, ambition and the joy of glad living, which is never apart from the joy of glad loving.

For the future—a future without secrets, lies or fear—would be all right!

She *knew* now that the future would be all right.

“Good-night, Morice!” she whispered with the smile still touching her lips—the lips that must remain un-kissed until the spring-time came.

“Good-night—good-night, my dear!” he answered, with deep intensity in his voice.

And that night Florence slept sweetly and dreamlessly for the first time since the farmhouse at Plins-treau was invaded by a patrol of Uhlans.

The message from a shining star had lightened all the darkness.

Truth and Hope always clear the way wherever they go.

SEVENTH CHAPTER

THE BRIDE'S DEPARTURE

ON the following Thursday morning the marriage of Florence Katrine Everest and Morice de Maulay Mandrake was celebrated with all the speed and lack of impressiveness which attends ceremonies performed by special licence and bereft of the customary religious and festive rites.

The bridegroom was grave, self-contained—almost disconcertingly self-contained—and inscrutable.

The bride was calm, silent and seemingly content. She wore a simple black costume and a black hat.

Immediately after the ceremony was performed the newly-married couple got into a car which conveyed them without delay to Waterloo Station where, seated waiting in a reserved first-class carriage, was a middle-aged person of super-reputable appearance.

She was obviously a nurse, superior maid or high-class attendant of some description, and when the newly-married couple appeared she busied herself arranging cushions and rugs in the corner seat best sheltered from draughts and other inconveniences.

The married couple seemed to have very little to say to each other, and immediately on reaching

the reserved compartment the bride stepped in, thanked the attendant and ensconced herself in the corner which had been arranged for her reception, while the bridegroom remained on the platform resting one hand on the door.

Once they looked at each other and smiled—it was a smile difficult to classify—then when the guard's whistle sounded the bridegroom turned to the reputable middle-aged person, and said :

“Remember, Mrs. Grey, my wife is in your hands—look after her well for me !”

Mrs. Grey gave a satisfying assurance, and once again the bride and bridegroom looked at each other—a strange long look which said more than the silent gazers knew.

Then the engine screamed——

“Till the spring—God bless you !” said Morice.

“Till the spring—God keep you !” answered Florence.

And the train went on its way.

PART II

FIRST CHAPTER

WHEN THE WIFE CAME HOME

SPRING-TIME !

In the grounds surrounding Gorse House, Upper Brendon, every gay spring flower was at its gayest, the yellows trying to outdo the lilacs in brilliance, the blues trying to eclipse the pinks in delicacy, the crimsons trying to beat the ambers in splendour.

Leaves and buds were on every tree, and birds—quite countrified sort of birds who seemed able to forget entirely the fact that they were mating less than seven miles from Piccadilly Circus—chirruped and sang in the boughs and round the windows of the house.

The house, too, had a fresh and pleasant aspect.

It was a roomy, convenient house which looked larger than it was, sufficiently modern to be equipped with the latest conveniences and appliances of every description, yet sufficiently well established to be covered with ivy on the side that faced west.

At the farther end of the kitchen garden was a small pond where a select number of ducks contrived

to have just as good a time as did the select number of chickens located on the other side of a thatched shed in which hay was stored during the winter months.

Also, there was a garage, an unpretentious orchard, several conservatories and a tennis lawn.

Inside the house itself everything was ideal, and if any fault could be found with anything it was that the taste displayed throughout was too unfalteringly perfect.

The dining-room was carried out in a scheme of black oak, electric-blue upholstery and copper. The drawing-room was a delicate dream-room where white merged into pink which, in turn, delicately drifted into green.

Blue was the predominant note in halls and on stairs and landings, and the library gave a pleasant impression of orientalism soundly and luxuriously carried out.

Then on the first floor was a suite of rooms—bed-room, boudoir and bathroom—which looked as though they had been prepared for the coming of some girl who was sweeter and purer and dearer than any girl had ever been before.

The walls were creamy as new milk, strewn with drifting garlands of violets which seemed to be thrown down from a fairy frieze of faintly tinted green.

The carpet and curtains were of a paler shade of violet, and here and there the faintly tinted note of green repeated itself.

On the dressing table were cut glass bottles filled with spring-flower perfumes, and the bookshelves

were stocked with the works of poets who wrote gladly, purely and idyllically about life and its ways.

In the domestic quarters was a modest staff of admirably selected servants, and in a small study on the ground floor was a man who always waited.

The man was Morice Mandrake, and Gorse House was the house he had prepared for his bride.

* * * * *

Yes, Morice Mandrake was always waiting.

During the day he got through such work as required getting through and served his country so far as lay in the power of a man above the age limit—but when duty was done he simply spent all the rest of his time in waiting.

It was spring-time now, and it was in the spring that Florence was coming back to him.

And something seemed to tell him that it would not be long before she came. For his work was done—the house was ready—and he had always felt that directly everything was completed she would come.

And he longed for her coming as he had never known that it was possible to long for anything, and as the empty days and weeks and months had drifted by he had gradually trained himself to forget everything except that Florence was his wife.

It was amazing how he had contrived to get his mind so completely under control as to force it to forget what he wished to be forgotten.

At first the horrible truth had haunted and dogged him night and day, but by degrees he had so resolutely thrust all hideous facts and reflections into the back-

ground, that by the time spring flowers bloomed in the garden of his bridal home his dreams and hopes were only of his bride.

His need of her was stupendous, and when day followed day and no message came to tell of her impending arrival his impatience began to get almost uncontrollable.

For him she was now as she had been on that unforgettable night of their first kiss. His own will-power had banished all the rest.

* * * * *

And one morning she came.

It was about twelve o'clock, and Morice was sitting in his study where he had been since breakfast.

On the desk in front of him lay papers connected with the equipment of a new military hospital—the cost of which he and half-a-dozen other men were preparing to defray—and for over a couple of hours he had been immersed in figures and other details.

But suddenly it seemed as though his train of concentrated thought was broken through. Some influence was disturbing his mind—drawing it away from estimates and tenders, rules and regulations.

He leaned back and passed his hand across his forehead.

There came a knock on the door.

“Come!”

The door opened—and a bridegroom was no longer without his bride!

* * * * *

She was wearing a costume of palest fawn touched with green—the colour of little leaves that burst silver in the spring—and in her arms she carried a stock of great long-stemmed daffodils.

To-day the sand-gold of her hair seemed alive with sunbeams that had got tangled in its meshes, and her cheeks were delicately stained with the pink of unborn rose-buds.

Her eyes were shining day-stars, looking out on life with the gladness of one who sees only happiness, and her smile must have created radiance in the heart of the most hardened pessimist who saw it.

She was the incarnation of re-creation—of new beginnings — of spring's renewed gladness and vitality !

She seemed part of the very spirit of life itself.

And there was no delay—no lagging moment during which memories might crowd and push away the perfection of passionate impulse.

The first embrace was instantaneous.

They were in each other's arms with the daffodils either crushed against their hearts or falling at their feet.

For them there was no war—no bloodshed—no grief—no death—no shame.

It was only love, the intense indescribable love of two people whose spirits had been mated by the angels. . . .

“ I—I'm so glad to be home ! ” were the first words Florence uttered when her lips were free to speak.

Morice's only answer was to take both her hands and press them against his heart. If he said anything he

would have said things that were hardly sane. For even at the most passionate crisis of his life a decently bred Englishman hesitates to let go of his sanity.

* * * * *

“And so this is where I am to live!” cried Florence a moment later, going to the window and looking out on a blaze of spring green and spring blossom.

“Yes, darling, this is where you are to live—with me!” And as he spoke the last words Morice emitted a low sound that was almost a laugh. It seemed as though a whole decade must have gone by since he laughed!

Florence turned and answered him gaily. Then she asked to see everything without one single moment's delay—after which a tour of inspection began.

And she found it all perfect, from the box-room under the gabled roof to the patent plate-drainer in the scullery, while the servants whom Morice had chosen seemed to be exactly the servants whom Florence herself would have selected.

The tiled bathrooms, too, specially delighted her, and when, without any hesitation or reticence, Morice took her into the small suite of rooms prepared for her own occupation—out of which opened his own sleeping apartment—her enthusiasm reached its limit.

“Oh! my dear! why did you think of it just as you *have* thought—as I should have thought if I had been able to think so beautifully!” she cried.

“I didn't think—it just came to me that for the *loveliest*, dearest, and *purest* woman in the world

there must be an atmosphere of as near perfection as—er—well, as wall paper and chintz could achieve!”

The end of the sentence was in lighter vein, but even when Morice emphasized the purity of an outraged woman who had borne a German soldier's child, there was no hesitation or strained consciousness in his voice or manner.

For time and will-power had done their work; also now that his wife had come home she was only and solely his.

Probably in that fact lay his sense of restored contentment.

Complete possession meant everything to a man who was passionately jealous while believing himself to be entirely free from this most human of all failings. Provided that a loved being or thing was absolutely his own—unshared in mind, body and soul—his heart was at rest.

But once admit any strong alien affection—even if it be one which should in no way legitimately interfere with the claims of lover or husband—and all serenity would leave his soul.

Morice Mandrake prided himself on being one of the most reasonable, restrained, tolerant and unemotional men in England. He was, in actual point of fact, entirely the reverse. But he didn't know it, and it would be a supreme pity if this happy, although misplaced, credulity were disturbed.

* * * * *

From her own apartments Florence passed into her husband's room and then downstairs again and into

the dining-room where an appetising lunch was waiting in readiness to be served.

"My dear, I don't think you are in the least need of a mistress for your house—it is so admirably ordered and appointed without me," she said when the parlour-maid had left the room to bring up a fresh course.

"Oh! this is only showing off," replied Morice with extreme gravity. "We are really very much in need of a guiding hand, only I didn't want to disclose weakness the first day."

Florence laughed with her lips and he laughed with his eyes, then the parlourmaid came in with salmon cooked exactly as salmon should be cooked and conversation returned to where he had left off when she quitted the room.

After lunch was over they visited the ducks and chickens, and christened them all after the various characters in Florence's novels—a ceremony which took a considerable amount of time. Then came tea, followed by inspection of the conservatories and hot-houses, and a short motor run in the new purple car.

This lasted until it was time to dress for dinner—time for Florence to slip into a soft white gown which intensified her appearance of youth, purity and radiant vitality.

"Are you ready?" called out Morice tapping at her door just as she was knotting a scarf with fringed ends.

"Come in!" answered Florence—and without hesitation he obeyed.

Then he stood still and looked at her almost wonderingly.

"How very beautiful you have grown!"

"Have I improved, dear? I am so glad. They say that there is nothing like happiness for improving the appearance!" (Not a whisper about the beautifying qualities of country air!)

"Are you really happy, my darling?"

"Oh! Morice, as if it were possible for me to be anything else?" (Not a hint of all that which had been passed through and had left a living trace behind!)

"I suppose, dearest, we ought really to be going away for a honeymoon?—I had never thought of that."

"No, not a honeymoon in war-time! Besides, what place could be better and more interesting and sweeter than the home you have got ready for me?" (Not a word to suggest that for the past several months she had been living a life of rural retreat!)

"My dear, you say exactly what a husband wants his wife to say!"

"Do I? Then it's because I feel exactly as a wife wants to feel! Oh! Morice—Morice——"

And for a moment nothing more was said because a man's arms which had wearied of emptiness clasped close his best beloved, and a man's lips which had grown cold for need of kisses found their haven of sweetness.

And as they stood there in the bedroom with its virginal decorations, locked in an embrace which seemed like the satisfying of long felt hunger, no shadow of war, outrages, or shame hovered around.

The bride belonged wholly to her bridegroom

and—after months of training his mind to forget what must be forgotten—that was all he needed.

* * * *

Five minutes later they went down to dinner, then when that eminently satisfactory meal was concluded, they adjourned to Morice's study, where he gave Florence details concerning the war-time work which he had taken in hand, before she told him in brief outline the plot of the next novel she intended to write.

It was an evening of perfect all-satisfying companionship, and nothing could have been more amazing than the manner in which the very passing of the last few months was ignored.

One would have thought that conversation must have halted from very consciousness, and that the turn of every other sentence must have touched upon what had elapsed since their last meeting.

But such was not the case.

Love and complete possession of the beloved had opened such generous founts of perfect sympathy—that, while the present and the future remained, the past was dead.

Morice Mandrake had got his wife at last. And she was entirely his own.

That was what he needed—that she should be entirely his own.

SECOND CHAPTER

A DAY IN THE COUNTRY

CONSIDERING it was war-time, when the world suffers both at home and abroad, Morice and Florence Mandrake were almost indecently happy.

And so it seemed as though they must remain, until suddenly a cloud crept up from the horizon of the past to obscure the sunlight of the present.

They had breakfasted together, and directly afterwards Morice had gone up to town to attend a committee meeting and other business—business which, however, instead of keeping him in the City and West End until six o'clock or later was got through in time for him to get back home early in the afternoon.

He was glad to get back early, because by so doing he and Florence could have a good long run in the car before dinner.

But where was Florence!

He looked for her directly he got in—looked in her boudoir and bedroom, and then all over the house before preparing to scour the grounds.

But this last activity was rendered unnecessary, because, crossing the hall, he met Beach—the admirable

parlourmaid who had been supplied by a registry office which thrived on exorbitant fees and a reputation for exclusiveness.

"Where is Mrs. Mandrake?" he inquired.

"Oh! I think Mrs. Mandrake said she was going down to the country again, sir, and wouldn't be back before six or half-past," replied the young woman smoothly.

"Ah! yes—of course—I had forgotten—yes, yes! Bring me some tea in the study, please."

"Very good, sir."

But when Beach took tea into the study it wasn't drunk, nor was the cake even cut—and all because a cloud had come to obscure the sunshine.

The country!

Those two words suggesting rural pleasures had come to Morice as a hideous shock. Yes, a truly hideous shock, insomuch that they reminded him of what still existed.

It seemed strange that since Florence's return he had never wondered concerning the child who had come into existence down at Bellborough, but so severe had been his mental schooling that on this subject he had never permitted himself one second's reflection.

But now he must think about it—he couldn't help it now that *present* circumstances forced it into his mind.

"Going down to the country *again*"—that's what Beach had said—"again"! And "again" must mean that she had gone before.

And when could that have been?

Ah! yes, of course, that day when he had gone up early to attend the law courts and visit solicitors, and hadn't returned till nearly seven.

Yes, that's when she must have seized the opportunity to visit the child—*her child!*

God! yes—*her child!* The child of this woman who seemed more to him than any woman had ever been before to any man.

Did she *love* it?

When this question darted into Morice's mind he experienced a shock that was almost annihilating.

Did his wife *love* the child of a drunken German soldier? Was the mother-instinct—which we are taught to believe is the strongest of any—asserting itself, and did her heart yearn towards this alien thing which a war-time tragedy had forced her to bring into the world?

The idea to Morice was more revolting than any he had ever conceived.

Yet Nature—maybe Nature is stronger than national feuds!

* * * * *

For half an hour Morice idled aimlessly about the house, then in desperation he set out to walk—to see if by working his limbs he could arrest the working of his brain.

If his brain would only keep still and not flood him with morbid and loathsome thoughts!—or if it would fix itself on outside matters——

But it wouldn't. It would pound and pound

away at the one idea—that his wife loved the shame-child whom she had been forced to bear!

This mother-love was a horrible thing! He had always thought it supremely beautiful, but now it appeared in a new light.

Mother-love (he told himself) was a purely animal instinct without reason or discrimination. A woman would love anything—any monstrosity or criminal—she chanced to bring into the world. (Yes, yes, she would even love the offspring of a drunken alien enemy if she were the vehicle selected to bring about its entry into the world!)

At a cottage door which Morice passed after walking about a quarter of an hour, there was a cat and her kitten.

It was a hideous kitten with bent legs, chipped ears and sore eyes—a revolting spectacle so far as any dear animal can be revolting—yet the cat licked it and crooned over it and purred round it with as much maternal adoration as if it had been a prize Persian or “highly commended” Angora!

The cat was a fool.

But it was Nature’s fault that it was a fool—Nature’s fault for imbuing it with the almost debased instinct of mother-love!

A little farther along Morice met two women standing by a gate. One woman was carrying a string bag stuffed with vegetables and the other had a baby in her arms.

But such a baby! An even more pitiful human specimen than the kitten was a feline one!

It squinted; it had a hare lip; its straight scanty hair was the colour of old carrots; it slobbered.

"And how is Willy?" asked the woman with the string bag.

"Bless 'im, 'e gets on a treat! We weighed 'im last week and found 'e 'd put on two pound, so 'e'll soon be 'is mother's big beautiful bouncing boy!" And with this last pitifully grotesque assertion the mother bent down and covered the malformed slobbering mouth with kisses of pride and affection.

This was mother-love. Nothing balked it, nothing arrested it, nothing quenched it. It was omnipotent.

* * * * *

Morice walked on savagely—for hours and for miles—then, when he tried to think that he had got his feelings sufficiently under control he retraced his steps and returned home.

And the first person he encountered after passing through the entrance gates was—Florence!

Her eyes were shining, her face was flushed and she smiled divinely. (Morice could almost fancy her purring and crooning as the fond fatuous mother-cat had purred and crooned!)

"Ah! where have you been?" she cried gaily. "Morice! You look guilty! I never saw a man look more as though he had been doing something he shouldn't do!"

And he felt the hot colour creep sluggishly to his face as if in actual point of fact there were grounds for her insinuations.

For he *was* guilty—guilty of thinking terrible thoughts.

"I came home earlier than I expected and found

you out ; so as *you* were out *I* went out," he replied with an air of laboured lightness.

" Oh ! I'm so sorry, dear ! If I'd known I'd have gone another day, only I thought you said that for certain you would be late."

(" *Gone another day !*"—gone another day to see the child she loved !—the child whom in time to come she would grow to love as much as she loved him—or more !)

" Have you brought home an evening paper ? " inquired Florence a moment later as they went into the house, she with her hand slipped through his arm and her whole body inclining towards him.

Morice replied that he had, after which they discussed the latest war developments and the general news of the day before going up to dress for dinner.

And as Morice was tying his tie he couldn't help reflecting upon the marvellous subtlety with which Florence contrived to avert any comment concerning where she had been and what she had been doing.

Just as she had slipped into the routine of home and married life without mentioning—or, more important still, appearing ostentatiously *not* to mention—what had occurred during the passing of autumn into spring, so she now slipped into the evening's routine without giving any clue (or making it seem strange that she didn't give any clue) as to where she had been passing the day.

But, then, of course, she thought he knew—for had it not been arranged between them that she should pay visits such as duty and conscience demanded ? And was it not a bargain—in fact did she

not swear solemnly—that never once either directly or indirectly should she allude to what had taken place between the day of their wedding and the day of her home-coming?

Of course this was so, and doggedly Morice told himself that he had no right whatever to feel as he was feeling now.

Florence was keeping her part of the bargain and it was incumbent upon him to keep his.

Yet that mother-love which was stronger than every other love—God! how could he bear the knowledge of it when it was expended by his wife on a child not his own—on a child——

God! he mustn't think of that other child! Such thoughts made him realise dimly the vile sluggish heat that must glow in a murderer's heart!

* * * * *

During dinner conversation progressed much as usual except, perhaps, that Florence talked with increased volubility and eagerness. It might almost seem that she had fear of silences.

And though Morice answered her tenderly and also contributed his full share of the conversation, there were moments when he found himself distrait, because he was watching her face—watching to catch some reflection of the mother-smile which she had been smiling at the alien enemy's child.

And many times he felt sure that he had caught it when a softness suffused her features and her lips moved gently. He could almost imagine that a baby was in her arms and that she was looking

down at it—and crooning—and making ridiculous noises——

Heaven! what a grotesque idea! He found himself wondering if she crooned in German and called it “*liebchen!*”

This was going to be an obsession with him—an absolute obsession!

* * * * *

“I am going to sit with you one hour and one hour only,” observed Florence, when they had adjourned to the drawing-room for coffee and liqueurs.

“Why can’t you stand me longer than an hour?” asked Morice suddenly, speaking in the lenient, good-natured way of a man addressing not only the woman he loves but also the woman who belongs to him. (For that particular moment he had forgotten about the days in the country and the universal law of mother-love.)

“Because, dear, I must get on with my work. This book has got to be finished, because the quicker I finish this book the quicker I get my nice fat cheque!”

“But why hurry for nice fat cheques? Haven’t you, besides a useful income of your own, a husband who has recently brought off several most propitious deals?”

“Yes, of course I have, dear—a most desirably generous husband. But still, all the same, I want my own cheque because—oh! because I do!”

The sentence ended lightly and merrily, but Morice saw through it.

Of course, it was for the child's sake that she wanted as much money as she could get. It had been Florence's own stipulation that she, and she alone, should defray every expense which her tragic secret might incur, and Morice, comprehending the 'sentiments which prompted this desire, had agreed without demur.

He had realised what agony it would be for her if he were to pay for the child of an alien enemy brought into the world by his (Morice's) wife. His very love had sharpened his powers of realisation.

And now as the mother's natural devotion for her child increased she wanted to provide it with additional luxuries—perhaps a redecorated nursery, finer and finer lace-trimmed garments, or even a more highly trained nurse.

Yes, Morice could understand now why his wife wanted to finish her new book so that the publisher's cheque might become due—he understood!

And that night, when Florence adjourned to her boudoir to begin a couple of hours' strenuous work, and Morice went to his own study, an embrace was missed—overlooked—omitted.

But not really overlooked so far as Morice was concerned, for he it was who connived at circumstances which made it possible to miss taking his wife in his arms and leaving the strength of his heart upon her lips.

That night—just that one night—he *couldn't* kiss her. For if he did so he would imagine a dozen horrible things.

He would imagine that a baby's wet mouth had been pressed where his was pressing—that somewhere

about her clung an odour of nursery powder—that—that——

But he didn't want to imagine—he wouldn't imagine!

He would just leave out the embrace.

THIRD CHAPTER

THE PICTURE POST-CARD

FLUCTUATION is one of life's main laws, and after Morice's first agonised awakening to the fact that his wife appeared to pay whole-day visits to the country more often than was humanely necessary the state of his feelings varied considerably.

When nearly a week passed without their being apart for more than two consecutive hours he was able to force himself into a more reasonable and saner state of mind, but when his own absences were taken advantage of for Florence to journey off somewhere (he didn't know where) in response to the demands of her maternal instinct, he felt as though the situation was becoming dangerously unbearable.

He was jealous — bitterly, cruelly, revengefully jealous of a German soldier's child!

And as his jealousy increased he found himself wondering more and more persistently where the child was being kept. A horrid longing to see it came over him. He felt he should take the same pleasure in looking at it as art scoffers take in looking at a weird cubist painting.

Then one morning the first part of his curiosity was satisfied.

The post arrived, and when the letters were brought into his room he found that a portion of Florence's correspondence had been by accident mixed up with his own.

One communication was obviously a cutting supplied by a Press agency, but the other was one of those mottled-grey envelopes, addressed in a straggling, unembellished handwriting, which more or less tell their own story—the story of coming from a conscientious person in a humble walk of life.

This envelope was addressed by a conscientious person in a humble walk of life—it came from the nurse who was looking after Florence's child!

Morice *knew* it did just as surely as if he had been able to see the contents.

If only he *could* see the contents—if only he could——

Powers in Heaven! he was getting his mind into a sufficiently degraded condition for it to contemplate opening other people's letters!

But even though he wouldn't open the letter (so far he hadn't quite lost control of his reasoning powers) he could look at the postmark—the postmark which would tell him where Florence kept her alien-enemy child in a state of infantile luxury.

He *did* look!

The postmark was Tickham Bridge.

* * * * *

An hour later Morice was strolling through the gardens digesting information which, by means of time tables and telephone, he had speedily secured.

Tickham Bridge was a small village six miles from the place where Florence had spent those months of seclusion between spring and autumn.

Of course it was quite natural that she should have spent part of her time in investigating adjacent neighbourhoods where suitable accommodation could be procured.

And she had chosen Tickham Bridge. The very name had a fresh rural sound which suggested pure air and a plentiful supply of nursery milk.

Morice felt a most morbid longing to go to Tickham Bridge.

* * * * *

Then a few days later chance gave another opportunity for satisfied curiosity when, walking towards the duck-pond to join Florence—who had gone ahead with bread, cake, crumbs and other delicacies which “The Earl of Trayle” (a fine, yellow-beaked waddler) and “Madame de Froufrounière” much appreciated—Morice picked up a post-card that was lying on the gravel path.

It was a picture post-card, depicting a grinning baby in the arms of a grinning young woman.

Morice glanced at it, but before he had time to do anything more than glance Florence called from the other side of the hedge.

“*Do come!* ‘Lord Trayle’ is so cordial to-day!” she cried.

Morice slipped the post-card into his pocket and went forward whistling jauntily.

To whistle jauntily was absolutely out of keeping

with his entire personality, and he didn't do it well. But he must do it. If he didn't he—he would do something else less *safe*!

"Isn't 'Daisy Beaufoy' growing?" observed Florence, indicating a small duckling who had been named after the *ingénue* heroine in her last novel but one.

"She is! She'll be gross and *passée* by the end of the week," replied Morice, looking interestedly at the wrong bird.

"You know I think 'Lord Trayle' is getting tired of 'Madame.'"

"Do you? Why? Has she bored him with too many details about the nest or the eggs?"

"It may be that—she certainly is too much of a good wife and mother to hold the affection of any bird-husband with essentially bohemian tastes!"

(Good wife and *mother*! It was strange how glibly she spoke the word "*mother*"!! Surely she could never utter it without thinking of the original of that post-card now lying between Morice's cigar-case and pocket-book!)

"And now, dear, there's a surprise for you in the other-department!" Here Florence threw to the ducks the last share of their dainties and led the way to the chicken colony.

Morice followed.

"Don't say that 'George Lessingham' has killed 'Maggie McClean,'" he said, alluding to an ornamental cock with murderous tendencies.

"No, no, he's been quite peaceful and values 'Maggie' more since 'Lady Angela' gave him up."

No, this is the surprise—'Mrs. Dawling' is a happy mother at last! Look!"

And Morice looked where, behind the wire netting of a well-ordered hen-house, a strutting feathery mother was clucking furiously round ten balls of golden fluff.

"Bravo, 'Mrs. Dawling'! You have done your duty to the ornithological State!" This was all that Morice could think of to say.

"Yes, isn't she good?" responded Florence. "And doesn't she love them! Oh! Morice, isn't love a beautiful thing, no matter if it's in a palace or a poultry yard! Doesn't 'Mrs. Dawling' think she's given the world its greatest treasures by giving it these ten silly little squeakers! Good 'Mrs. Dawling'! Happy 'Mrs. Dawling'!"

But Morice couldn't answer—he felt that he couldn't! It seemed to him that his wife's audacity was incredible. Surely she could have the—the decency to hide the fact that she sympathised with the happiness of a hen simply and solely because that hen happened to have become a mother! Was it necessary for her to show so insistently that she sympathised with the fatuous pride and joy of maternal love?

Morice remained quite silent for a moment, looking foolishly contemplative as some men do contrive to look when furnaces and furies are raging within them.

Then, with a sudden exclamation which gave the impression of something important having been forgotten, he murmured a vague allusion to an expected trunk call and hurried back to the house.

He couldn't help himself. It would have been morally impossible for him to remain any longer hearing Florence comment on the joy and beauty of mother-love!

Besides, there was the post-card.

Never before in his life had he been impatient when trifles were concerned, but now this trifle—this picture post-card—was making him feel that procrastination could mean madness!

* * * * *

Directly Morice reached the seclusion of his study the post-card was brought to light.

He took it to the window and gloated over it—for hatred can gloat as well as love!

The child was beautiful! It had the infamous, criminal audacity to be beautiful! And it was smiling at him—God! its big round eyes were looking into the very heart of *his* eyes—looking at him with all the friendly merriment of a happy baby!

(He could kill it! It was in his soul to kill—to kill!)

The young woman who was holding it was also smiling—no, *grinning*, the grin of the proud nurse who knows that her charge is a charge of whom she (in common with the charge's adoring mother) has every right to be proud.

The child wasn't in the least like Florence so, of course, it must resemble—

God! how Morice—who all his life had been a lover of children—longed to kill this particular child!

It would even be a relief to tear up the post-card

—to tear it right across the smiling mouth and big round eyes—but that should not be done, because it might serve for purposes of identification.

And—and—good heaven! the last shock of all!

Underneath the picture was written a word which until that moment Morice had not noticed. Just one single word—a name—the baby's name!

“MAX!”

Florence—his wife—had given her alien-enemy's child an alien-enemy's name!

She had called it “*Max*”—a German name!

Was this a polite attention to the other parent who was absent? A delicate acknowledgment of the child's paternal nationality? Did she imagine that the drunken soldier's name might be “*Max*,” or had he supplied her with the important information?

* * * * *

Time passed till Morice realised that he had spent over twenty minutes staring at a picture post-card and cultivating all the worst feelings of his nature.

He put the post-card back in his pocket and wondered how he could get through the rest of his life.

And it might be a long life, too! Lives which had become acute torture to the people condemned to live them usually were long lives! . . .

At lunch the husband and wife met again, and while they were together Florence said casually:

“Will you be wanting the car to-morrow, dear?”

“Not in the morning. In the afternoon I was

going to run down to Ridgley's place about signing those deeds. He's got 'flu.' and can't come up. But I can easily go by train and——"

"No, dear, of *course* not," interrupted Florence with a touch of affectionate petulance which was very charming (or would have been very charming but for the existence of MAX!) "If I have the car it can take me out in the morning, then come back to you. Nothing could be better—it fits in beautifully!!"

Fits in beautifully! Yes, Morice could fit it in beautifully—he could fit in all the pieces of the puzzle!

Florence was going to Tickham Bridge to take the alien enemy's child for an airing in the car—*his* car—which would be at liberty directly the infantile lungs had been sufficiently filled with oxygen!

Would the grinning nurse accompany her, or would she enjoy the rapture of her child's society unhindered by the presence of anyone likely to usurp his attention?

Would she hold him in her arms all the time?—fondling him, and crooning to him and kissing him, and forgetting while his face was pressed close against her own that he (Morice) was inconsiderate enough to exist!

For if he (Morice) did not exist, mother-love would have no need for secrecy and repression.

It would be able to blossom and bloom like the beautiful plant of nature which it was supposed to be!

* * * * *

Heaven! how could he stand it all!

If it were not for the existence of this pictured, fêted, adored and visited child he could absolutely regard the past with equanimity and feel as though it had never been.

His wife was *his* wife—some day (please God!) she would be the mother of *his* children—their love and sympathy were so absolute and entire, and the present was so idyllically perfect that a sinless tragedy of the past was as completely wiped out as though it had never been.

But the child—the child who was loved more than he was loved——

God! this was the sort of thing which made murderers of men!

“Max”——“*Max!*”——

FOURTH CHAPTER

"MAX"

THE next day Morice awoke feeling horribly strong because a horrible determination had taken root during the night.

But it was the best thing he could do. It would settle matters one way or the other. He would then know the limits of his own endurance.

At nine he took breakfast alone, then went out immediately leaving word that directly Mrs. Mandrake had finished with the car it was to come back for him.

To Florence he scrawled a brief, tender (oh, the hypocrisy!) line saying that he was sorry not to see her, but that important business connected with the hospital had called him off without delay.

Then he went—but not to attend any important business! No, not to do anything more strenuous than read the papers at the local Conservative Club until such time as Florence would have started for Tickham Bridge.

He gave her ample margin, however, and did not return to Gorse House until nearly eleven—after which there was an hour's wait until the car came back.

And when it arrived Morice went out and spoke to the chauffeur.

"I have changed my plans," he said, "and find that, after all, I needn't go to town. Therefore I shall be able to fetch Mrs. Mandrake back as she wished. So get your dinner at once—as quickly as you can to-day, Holt—and then take me to join Mrs. Mandrake at Tickham Bridge."

The chauffeur saluted.

"Very good, sir," he said—and with that "very good" Morice knew that his detective faculties had served him well, and that he had put together the pieces of the puzzle with commendable accuracy.

Florence had been tricked! Holt had been tricked! Perhaps, even, it might be possible to trick "Max" when they got to Tickham Bridge!

Powers in heaven! What *would* Morice do when they got to Tickham Bridge!

Powers in heaven! What *would* Morice do when he saw Max near enough to—to—to kill.

* * * * *

Half an hour later they started—the chauffeur entirely unconscious that he was taking his master to inflict upon his mistress the second most horrible shock of her life!

Morice took a sort of ghoulisn pleasure in staring at Holt's back and thinking how he had been tricked into tricking someone else!

At least Florence was not actually being tricked—for she knew that her husband was aware of the existence of her child. She was only being tricked

insomuch that she wouldn't any longer be able to keep her maternal devotion to herself.

She would have to show it off!—Morice would absolutely insist upon her showing it off!

* * * * *

The country they passed during the run was delightful, and Morice found himself feeling grimly amused at the irrational methods of Nature.

She could make some things in the world—trees, fields, spring blossoms—so beautiful and others so revolting and iniquitous!

Here was he passing through scenes which were beautiful to reach a *milieu* that was revolting and iniquitous!

It would seem less incongruous if it were the worst month of autumn! The spring-time gladness was insufferable!

"See—er—we are not very far now, are we?" he called to the chauffeur when it seemed to him that they must have travelled endless miles.

"No, sir, not more than ten minutes now," replied Holt.

Morice made a sound that was meant to signify approval, and once more sat back in his seat.

His impatience must be checked. It was terrible to think that he, who prided himself on always keeping his emotions under control, should feel as he was feeling now.

He felt he must command Holt to exceed all speed limits so that they could more quickly reach the abode of—MAX!

* * * * *

And at last the car pulled up.

They had turned round a corner, reached the end of a tree-shaded lane which seemed to lead to nowhere, and had pulled up in front of a high wooden gate.

It was rather a picturesque gate, and across the top of it were the painted words "VILLA BRUXELLES."

"*Villa Bruxelles!*" Heavens! to think that Florence could thus keep her mind in touch with the capital of the country in which the great tragedy of her life took place!

It seemed almost incredible that she should help herself to remember when peace could only come with forgetfulness!

But perhaps it was for the sake of the child! Perhaps it appeared more suitable for his surroundings to be as continental as was possible in an English village!

And Morice actually laughed grimly as he thought his bitter thoughts—a laugh which, in a woman, would have savoured of hysteria.

Then he pushed open the gate and went straight ahead down a gravelled path on either side of which grew high holly and privet hedges.

And he could see what happened on the other side of those hedges without he himself being seen.

But, so far, nothing happened—on one side were paddocks green with bright straggling grass, and on the other neat lawns dotted with clumps of trees and a few laid-out beds—then suddenly everything happened!

An abrupt turn of the path brought him in full view of a long low white house with a brown roof and creepers surrounding the lattice windows.

It was a charming house, and Morice found himself looking through a gap in the hedge and staring at it with resentful admiration.

Then before he had realised that all the curtains were of white tied back with the colours of Belgium, he heard voices and saw people.

"Come along, Max! Max come out in the garden!"

It was his wife who spoke.

She was walking backwards and waving some absurd toy as she went—and a moment later she was followed by the smiling picture post-card nurse carrying the smiling picture post-card child!

At last Morice was in view of the living human creature who was turning his life from heaven into hell!

He stood quite still, and the heavy inane expression which always indicated pent-up dangerous feelings settled on his face.

If only the nurse would *drop* the child—just one sudden fall and his own life might be put right again!

And the child was a beautiful child, with the pink cheeks and laughing mouth and big round eyes of an adored and petted offspring.

Offspring! For the first time Morice found something horrible in that word.

This child was his wife's offspring—and it had the fair fresh colouring of a Teuton father!

* * * * *

And still Morice watched, remaining rigid and motionless while Florence laughed with the child, made absurd noises at it, and finally bent forward with

one of her own characteristically impulsive movements and took it from its nurse's arms.

And immediately the child set up a shrill howl of protestation—to which Morice listened with feelings of positively fiendish satisfaction.

Max preferred his nurse to his mother! Max objected to being taken away from the picture post-card young woman who grinned!

After a few seconds, however, the child appeared to grow reconciled to the change of embrace and began banging his baby fists against Florence's face with friendly vehemence.

And how Florence laughed at his boisterous blows! And how she kissed him!—and buried her face in his fat neck—and pretended to nibble his ear——

Then suddenly Morice dashed forward and forced the thinning of the hedge into a definite gap.

He couldn't watch this any longer! Florence must put down that child!—put it down—put it down——

"*Morice!*"

The greeting cry was full of supreme astonishment not unmixed—naturally!—with consternation.

"*Morice!* How *did* you find your *way*?"

Florence asked this first question with excited emphasis on every other word—then suddenly as she had taken the baby away from its nurse's arms she put it back again before going up to her husband.

"Morice, dear, do tell me how you found out where I was?" she cried, now contriving to seem quite gay—almost pleased.

"I told Holt to bring me to where you were," answered Morice dully.

"What a very cunning idea, darling! But you might have told me—we could have come together and—oh! Morice, *permettez moi vous presenter*——" (she broke suddenly into French and addressed the grinning picture post-card young woman) "——a *Madame Sérous, de Bruxelles!*"

Morice bowed. He felt that he must be going mad—that he couldn't really be bowing ceremoniously to the nurse paid to rear a drunken German soldier's child!

"Madame Sérous came over almost at the beginning of the war," continued Florence, still speaking French so that the picture post-card young woman should understand, "and I am glad to say that she will be joined by her husband to-morrow. He has just managed to get away—hasn't he, Madame?"

Madame replied delightedly that he had, then just as she was about to break into voluminous details connected with Monsieur Sérous's escape and journey a uniformed nurse appeared in the doorway.

"Mrs. Mandrake, could I speak to you a moment?—about changing those rooms," she said.

"Yes, Sister—of course," replied Florence readily. "I won't be long," she added, turning to Morice, "and while I'm away Madame Sérous will tell you all sorts of interesting things—also you can make the acquaintance of our one and only, little Max!"

Little Max!

Was she mad? Was *he* mad? Had the war unhinged every mind in the world?

"Ah! Monsieur," broke in Madame's pretty shrill

voice, “it is a great honour to meet you and to be able to say of Madame Mandrake all that she will not hear said *to* her! I owe my life and everything to your beautiful English wife, Monsieur!”

“Do you—I am very glad—but I do not quite understand,” replied Morice, finding it easier to be non-committally vague in French than he would have done in English.

“But Madame surely has told you—ah! no, she is so modest that probably she would not speak even to her own husband of her goodness. I will tell you, Monsieur. When I came to England with the other refugees I was expecting my child to be born—my little Max——”

“*Your* child? This is *your* child?” interrupted Morice almost wildly.

“But yes, Monsieur. My son—Max—whom Madame was so sweet as to suggest should be named after our gallant Maire. (It was Madame’s thought—not mine!) Yes, I was expecting my baby to be born, and though the good English Government made provision, my heart was heavy and I was oh! so sad and lonely! And in some way—through a doctor who lives near this neighbourhood, I believe—Madame heard of me. Then she heard of three more of my countrywomen—two who had recently become mothers and one who expected—and she invited us all to this beautiful home and—ah! there is Madame Brausch! You see, passing behind the tree—she is still sad because, though the child is well and strong, she has not heard yet from her husband. It is cruel, this war, Monsieur, and it is only the good angels

like Madame who make us remember that there are still the holy saints ready to help us ! ”

“ Yes—yes—of course,” replied Morice dully, and in English.

Then just as Madame Sérous was about to commence another outbreak of volubility Florence appeared at the front door.

She beckoned Morice, and heavily he went towards her.

He was groping ; he couldn’t understand anything, yet he was almost afraid to ask for things to be made clear.

Max, the picture post-card baby—was now explained. (He was a bonny little chap—a credit to Belgium !) But what of the other child—the child who seemed to have the power of turning a sane man into a fiend ? Where was he ? When would come the shock of seeing him ?

“ Did you know that I was running this place, dear ? ” asked Florence when Morice reached her side.

“ No, I didn’t know,” he answered.

“ Oh ! I thought you must have heard and that was why you came down.”

“ No—no ! ”

“ It’s pretty here, isn’t it ? ” She spoke hesitatingly and shyly like someone whose speech is hampered by restriction.

“ Why did you do it ? ” asked Morice suddenly.

“ Well, because—er—well, dear, may I speak of things which you made me swear never to mention ? Of course I’ve kept my oath—I haven’t said or hinted a word to you, have I ?—but now you have come here—— ”

“ For God’s sake tell me everything ! ”

Morice spoke louder than he knew. He had been keeping in so much that at last bursting emotions found vent through his voice.

Florence glanced at him, then slipped her hand through his arm.

"I have finished here for to-day," she said. "We can go home now—I will tell you on the way."

* * * * *

Ten minutes later they were seated side by side in the car, skimming through the sunshine and gladness of spring.

"Tell me!" said Morice.

Under the rug she put out her hand and touched his. Then she told him.

"*'Maison Bruxelles'* is my thank-offering," she said. "I felt that something was due from me—due as an acknowledgment for heaven's unspeakable mercy in letting me keep you and in making the future clear—so when I heard of these poor women who suffered just when they needed peace, I took the old house you have just seen and fitted it up as a sort of home for the mothers and the children. It has kept me very busy and now I must work extra hard to keep it going. But it is a great happiness to me—*great!*"

"Yes, I—I can—understand—that—" (he dreaded to ask—*dreaded*—but it must be done!) "—but what about the other—the child that——"

"I know, dear, what you mean. I should have told you before, but of course, I was bound by an oath not to speak a word——"

"Never mind the oath—tell me now—*now*——"

"*There is no child*, Morice—there never was a child. It was a life mercifully ended before it began. I was taken ill less than six weeks after our marriage—and then the tragedy was over. But I did not come home until the spring. I kept things as we had arranged because I wanted all these months to pass before we met. New hope and new happiness were growing up all the time those weeks and months were passing. It was better, wasn't it, dear?"

He nodded and crushed her hand—and she understood. Their souls understood each other.

No child! No trophy!—no rival!—no thing to be loved more than he was loved!

Only himself and his wife!—his wife and himself all in all to each other!

The past wiped out—the murder-fury taken from his heart!—the grace of God restored to his soul!

"My love!" whispered Morice at last, "oh! my love!—my dear *love*!"

And Florence lifted his hand from beneath the rug and pressed it against her cheek!

* * * * *

A year later their daughter was born.

She came nearly in the summer-time—and "**PEACE**" was the sweet strange name they gave her!

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